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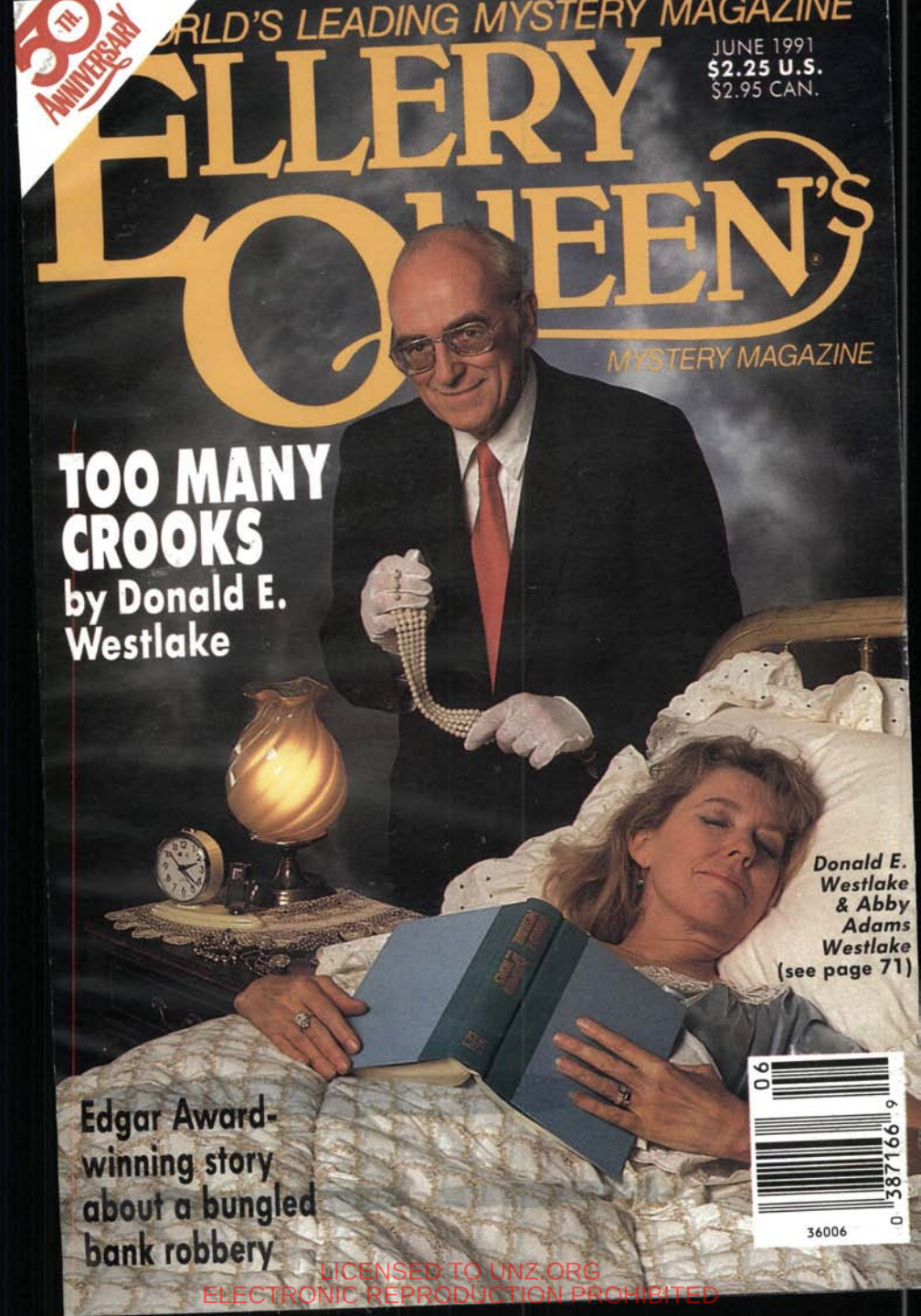
by Donald E. Westlake



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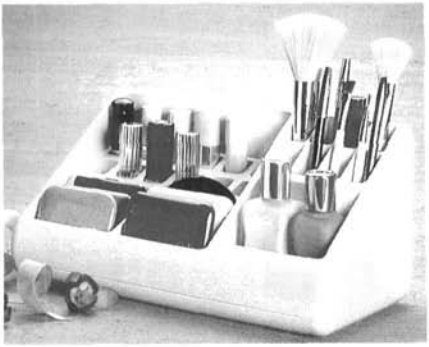

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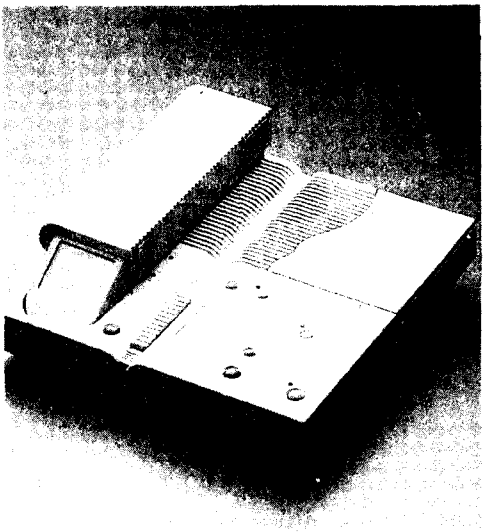

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On our cover are DONALD E. WESTLAKE and ABBY ADAMS WESTLAKE

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ISSUE #584—DEDICATED TO EDWARD D. HOCH

In Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *Francis M. Nevins, Jr., writes: "Some of Edward D. Hoch's most vividly written stories appeared in the* Alfred Hitchcock *and* Saint Mystery Magazines *during the 1960s, among them his Edgar-winning 'The Oblong Room,' in which Captain Leopold investigates a college campus murder with bizarre religious overtones. But from 1965 to the present, his most consistent market has been* Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, *which, with very few exceptions, has featured at least one Hoch story per issue since the early 1970s. Although his EQMM output is usually written in the plainest nuts-and-bolts style, the story concepts are generally stimulating, and his best efforts for the magazine are lovely miniaturizations of the classic fair-play detective novels for which Queen himself is famous."*

In the same volume, Ed Hoch himself comments: "I work mainly in the short story because I find that form most satisfying to me, and amenable to the type of formal detective story I do best. Series characters work especially well for me within the framework of a short story."

Following are two stories by our all-time most prolific contributor, the first a series story about one of his series characters, Ben Snow, the second a non-series short which originally appeared in the December 1971 issue of EQMM under one of his half dozen or so pseudonyms, R. L. Stevens. To add to Mr. Hoch's awesome contribution to the genre, he has published five novels, a number of mystery articles and anthologies (including, since 1976, The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories *(originally titled* Best Detective Stories of the Year*), and has participated in numerous panel discussions about the mystery field in the United States and abroad.*

With all this, the prodigious practitioner of the detective story lives a quiet life in Rochester, New York, with his wife of thirty-three years, Patricia . . .

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THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN OF BUFFALO CREEK

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Montana was not a state in which Ben Snow liked to spend the winter months, so when October rolled around he quit his job at a ranch near the Canadian border and headed south, hoping to get clear of the state before the first frost. Riding south on his horse Oats, he made a wide circle around Rock Springs, a coal town where twenty-eight Chinese miners had been massacred a decade earlier in 1885. Racial and ethnic unrest still simmered among the immigrants there—it was a good area to avoid.

That was how he happened to end up in Buffalo Creek one evening just after sundown. The town was about the same size as Rock Springs, but without the coal mine to sustain it economically. Not a company town like many others along the railway, it was, in fact, located a day's ride from the nearest rails. Seeing it at dusk from the top of a rise, Ben did not consider it an inviting place, but he'd spent the night in worse. With a chill already in the air, the thought of a feather bed appealed to him more than a blanket by the campfire. He'd turned thirty-six a few months back and was beginning to feel middle-aged.

He heard the sound of hoofbeats—a horse, coming fast, topping the rise and starting down the trail behind him. He turned, and what he saw in the gathering gloom froze his blood. The rider, dressed like a cowhand and urging his horse on with a beating of the reins, had no face, no head.

Above his shoulders there was nothing.

By the time Ben recovered from the shock, the headless rider had gone past, silent except for the beating of the hooves, leaving only a brief trail of dust. Ben let the air escape from his lungs, not really certain he hadn't been deceived by some trick of twilight. But the headless rider had passed not twenty feet from him and the cloudless sky was not yet dark. He knew he'd seen what he had seen.

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He spurred Oats on down the trail, trying to keep the diminishing cloud of dust in sight. Soon, however, it faded, settling in the night air until there was nothing visible before him. He rode farther on toward town until he came upon a young woman in dungarees and a shirt, paused with her horse at the shallow creek that no doubt gave the town its name.

"Pardon me, Miss. Did a rider come this way about five minutes ago?"

She looked up, her round face barely visible in the near-darkness. "Not that I saw."

"He was— The light was bad, but I couldn't see his head."

She gave a whoop of joy. "Our headless horseman! You saw him!"

"You mean you've seen him, too?"

"Come with me. I'm heading into town and we can talk on the way. I'm Thelma Blake—I work for the newspaper here."

"Ben Snow." The idea of a town the size of Buffalo Creek having a newspaper amazed him, but after all it was almost the Twentieth Century. "What sort of paper do you have?"

"Just a weekly. Five hundred people can't support more than that. *The Buffalo Creek Banner.* But tell me about your sighting of the headless horseman. That's good for a page-one story and we go to press tomorrow."

"He's a local legend?" Ben asked, letting Oats fall in step beside her horse.

"He has been for the past few months, since the first sighting. It's always at sundown, and usually in this area. That's why I often ride out here, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. But I've had no luck so far."

As they rode down into town, Ben described exactly what he'd seen. "It's some sort of trick, of course," he finished up, not wanting this young woman to think he believed in ghosts. As the lantern light from the buildings fell across her face, he saw that she was attractive, with rosy cheeks that indicated the outdoor life agreed with her.

"What brought you this way, Mr. Snow?" she asked.

"I had a summer job on a ranch up north. I'm headed south before the snow sets in."

"Look at the mountain peaks and you'll see it's already here." She reined up her horse. "This is the office of *The Banner.*"

Ben tied Oats to the hitching post and followed Thelma inside. A white-haired man wearing an eyeshade was busy at a tray of type,

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laboriously fitting letters into a long slotted stick. "This is Colonel Daggert, our publisher," she said by way of introduction. "Colonel, this is Ben Snow."

The Colonel lifted his head from the typesetting task. "Welcome to Buffalo Creek."

"He saw the headless horseman," Thelma told the publisher. "Out on the creek trail as usual."

Colonel Daggert put down his stick of type. "I'll be damned! You're the first stranger from out of Buffalo Creek to see him, Mr. Snow. The rest have all been townsfolk. I was beginnin' to suspect some elaborate practical joke."

"It might still be a joke," Ben pointed out. "But I saw him."

"Comin' from the direction of the Clayton ranch?"

Ben turned to Thelma for an answer. "That's right," she confirmed. "I'll ride up there in the morning and talk to Gus Clayton, find out if he saw or heard anything."

"We go to press in the afternoon," Colonel Daggert reminded her. "You've got to have the story written and typeset by one o'clock."

"I'll be up early," she promised. "Want to ride out with me, Mr. Snow? You could tell Gus exactly what you saw."

Ben nodded. He was stuck in the town overnight anyhow. "Sure. Is there a place here I can spend the night?"

"Mrs. Jenkins' rooming house. I'll take you there."

Colonel Daggert walked him to the door. "You plannin' to stay long, Mr. Snow?"

"No, I'll be heading south tomorrow."

"That's wise. The winters are unfriendly in these parts."

Ben wondered if he was being warned away. As he walked down the street with Thelma, leading Oats behind him, he asked, "Is he a real colonel?"

"He was during the war. He fought at Chancellorsville, and then at Gettysburg. He came west after the war and served a few years with the cavalry. Then he married and retired from the Army. He started the newspaper about ten years ago. His wife used to help him, but she died last year and he hired me."

"Just the *two* of you put out the paper?"

"A young man, the sheriff's son, helps run the press once a week, but the Colonel and I do all the writing and he sets all the type personally. He's over sixty but he has a lot of energy."

The rooming house Thelma recommended was a great old gingerbread of a place such as Ben seldom encountered in small western

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towns. It was the perfect house for Mrs. Jenkins, a large woman who was wearing a fancy blue gown and dangling earrings. Ben thought she'd have been equally at home as mistress of a San Francisco mansion or madam of a New Orleans brothel.

"Mr. Snow," she gushed when they'd been introduced, "it's a pleasure to welcome you to my home! I have a fine room at the top of the stairs I think you'll like. Will you be staying long in Buffalo Creek?"

"Only for the night. I understand your winters are bad."

"They are. But it's only October!" Mrs. Jenkins said, leading the way upstairs. "My rooms are cheap and there are jobs around for able-bodied men like yourself."

"Doing what?"

"Gus Clayton's always hiring people out at his ranch."

"In the winter?"

"He keeps them busy."

Thelma, who'd followed them upstairs, added, "He probably has a hundred men working out there."

"When we ride out there tomorrow, I'll ask him about a job," Ben said, but he was only making light conversation. The town held no great appeal for him, despite the undeniable charms of Thelma Blake.

"Suppose I pick you up here in the morning," she suggested. "Nine o'clock?"

"Fine."

"Sleep well!"

She bounded down the stairs like a schoolgirl and was out the door before he could say anything more. "A lovely girl," Mrs. Jenkins pronounced.

The room was small but satisfactory, with a communal bathroom down the hall. "This will be fine," Ben decided, taking out his leather pouch of silver dollars to pay her.

"Would you like a bit of tea before you retire?"

"That's a fine suggestion."

He joined her a few minutes later in the sitting room, which was festooned with heavy brocade draperies across the windows, effectively blocking out the night. "Do you have any other guests at the moment?" he asked.

"Only Mr. Shanty. He's very quiet, so you should get a good night's sleep." She carefully filled his cup with steaming tea.

"I hear you have a local legend in Buffalo Creek—a headless horseman who's seen at night near the Clayton ranch."

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"Oh, posh!" She passed Ben a biscuit. "You're an experienced man, Mr. Snow. You know that's just someone playing tricks to scare people. There was that writer, Washington Irving, who even wrote a story about a headless horseman trying to scare someone. And Halloween is coming, after all."

"But I understood he's been seen for the past few months. It wasn't Halloween back in July."

Mrs. Jenkins waved a hand dismissively. "I'm not concerned about headless horsemen as long as they stay out of town and don't scare my guests."

Later, as he headed upstairs, she called out, "Oh, Mr. Snow—we don't allow weapons in the rooms! Could you leave your gunbelt down here, please?"

In the morning, Ben ate breakfast with Mr. Shanty, a thin, mousy man who said barely a word. Mrs. Jenkins bustled between them with plates of flapjacks and a pot of coffee, asking if they had had a good night's sleep.

Thelma Blake was waiting outside on her horse at nine o'clock.

Ben went around to the shed where Oats had spent the night, tossed a blanket over his back, and saddled up.

The ride back toward the Clayton ranch was much more impressive by day. Ben marveled at the way the clear blue sky seemed to caress the distant mountains. "You were right about the snow on the peaks," he told Thelma as they rode.

"They say Gus Clayton's ranch has the best view in the county. You can judge for yourself. We're almost there."

They were on the same path where he'd encountered the headless horseman the previous evening. Now all was peaceful, and the pine trees on either side of the trail swayed gently in the morning breeze. Ahead was the fence and gate marking the entrance to the Clayton ranch. As they reached the gate, a rider appeared on the other side. "Rudy," Thelma called out to him, "we've come to see your boss!"

He rode up and unlatched the gate. "Who you got with you, Miss Blake?"

"This is Ben Snow, Rudy. He was passing through the area last evening and saw the headless horseman up near here. I want to get Gus's reaction for an article I'm writing. Ben, this is Rudy Wingate, Mr. Clayton's foreman."

"I'll ride up to the house with you," Wingate said, nodding to Ben.

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Ben brought Oats up next to his horse. "I hear you employ a lot of men here."

"A fair number."

"I'm heading south for the winter, but I could stay around if the job was good enough. What do you do up here in the winter?"

"There's always work," Wingate answered, "but we're not hiring anyone else right now."

Presently the sprawling ranchhouse came into view, along with a cluster of bunkhouses and a large barn that seemed to dominate the landscape. Wingate escorted them to the house and went inside for his employer. "He wears his gun low," Ben commented to Thelma. "Some gunfighters do that, for a fast draw."

Rudy returned almost immediately with a trim white-haired man who appeared to be in his mid-fifties. He wore cowboy boots, but his pants and shirt seemed more suited to big-city life. There was no sign of a gunbelt such as Rudy and Ben himself wore. "Always pleased to welcome the press," Clayton said, extending his hand to Thelma. She introduced Ben and the rancher spent a few moments talking about the size of his operation.

Then Thelma switched the conversation to the reason for their visit. "I was out on the trail last night and I encountered Ben riding through. He said he'd been passed on the trail by a galloping horseman without a head."

"Are you still on that subject, Thelma?" Clayton scoffed. "Halloween's not for another three weeks."

"The stories have been frightening a lot of people," she insisted. "And the sightings seem to be centered around your ranch."

The front door of the house opened and a trim, middle-aged woman emerged. Her hair was dark and her features might have reflected some Spanish blood. "Wouldn't your guests be more comfortable inside, Gus?" she asked.

"We're just finishing up," he told her, seeming to resent the intrusion. "Thelma, I believe you've met my wife Maxine. And this is Ben Snow, Maxine."

Maxine Clayton seemed vaguely familiar to Ben, but he couldn't imagine where they might have met before. If she recognized him, she gave no sign. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Snow," she said.

Thelma addressed herself to her. "I was just telling your husband that Mr. Snow sighted the headless horseman near here last evening. Have you ever seen him, Mrs. Clayton?"

"No, I rarely venture out after dark. There are too many animals."

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Ben wondered if she was referring to the hundred-odd men in her husband's employ. "That's quite a barn you have," Ben told him, indicating the structure some hundred yards from the house.

"We have a great deal of acreage," Clayton explained. It explained very little to Ben, who'd worked on a number of ranches.

Thelma wasn't ready to give up yet. Taking a pad and pencil from her pocket, she asked the rancher, "Do you have any comments about this latest sighting of the headless horseman near your ranch?"

"I think too much is being made of it. I think it's a trick of moonlight and shadows without any ghostly significance."

She jotted the statement down and seemed satisfied to have something from him.

Back in Buffalo Creek, Ben and Thelma found a frustrated Colonel Daggert virtually beside himself, pulling tools from a cabinet and cursing a red-haired boy of fifteen or sixteen who stood by the printing press with ink on his hands and shirt.

"What happened?" Thelma asked.

"Damn kid wrecked my press! Broke the screw holding the ink roller and—"

"I was just—" the boy began to blubber.

Thelma went to him, ignoring the splotches of ink, and put her arm around his shoulders. "Don't worry, Kenny. It was an accident. These things happen."

"It'll take me half the day to fix that press," Daggert grumbled. "The paper'll be late."

"That's all right," Thelma said quickly. "I'm hot on the trail of the headless-horseman story. Mr. Snow and I are going out to lay a trap for him tonight. It'll make a great headline."

It was all news to Ben, who'd hoped to continue his ride south by afternoon. He was about to object, but Thelma shot him a glance and he said nothing. Obviously she was trying to lessen the force of Daggert's wrath. "Here," she said, turning the boy toward Ben, "this is Ben Snow. He's been a cowhand on a lot of big ranches. Ben, meet Kenny Lane, Sheriff Lane's son."

"Hello, Kenny," Ben said, shaking Kenny's ink-stained hand.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," the boy managed.

"Colonel," Thelma urged, "let's plan on going to press at noon tomorrow. That way I'll have time to update the headless-horseman

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story and we'll only be a day late. It's not the first time we've been late."

Daggert eyed the youth with obvious scorn, but he relented. "All right, noon tomorrow. Kenny, you get that press cleaned up while I try to find the part I need."

Thelma, visibly relieved, turned to Ben and said, "If you're still game, I'll meet you here at five o'clock. We should be out there before sundown."

"I'll be here," he promised.

Mr. Shanty was sitting on the front porch of the boarding house when Ben returned shortly after noon. He nodded vaguely at Ben and glanced at his watch as if he was expecting a visitor. Ben went inside and helped himself to a cup of tea in Mrs. Jenkins' kitchen. He was about to go up to his room when he heard a familiar voice on the porch outside. It was Maxine Clayton and she was arguing with Shanty.

"You do it!" she told him. "Do your damndest, but you won't get a penny from me!"

Shanty muttered something Ben couldn't hear, ending with "today."

Ben stepped onto the porch and the conversation ceased abruptly. Clayton's wife seemed surprised to see him there. "Well, Mr. Snow! I suppose Shanty brought you along as part of his blackmail scheme!"

"Mrs. Clayton, I don't know what you're talking about."

Shanty seemed fearful at this turn of events. He scurried down off the porch, saying over his shoulder, "You've been warned, Maxine. Your husband and the paper will have the story today."

Ben watched until he disappeared down the street. "What story is that, Mrs. Clayton?"

"You can call me Maxine. No need pretending you don't remember me."

And suddenly Ben did remember her, from a shabby cafe on the Rio Grande a decade earlier. She was known simply as Maxine then, without a husband or a last name, willing to go upstairs with anyone who had the price. "You're a long way from home," he said.

"This is my home now. I figured it was far enough away from that other life. Then Shanty turns up and threatens me. And you turn up, too."

"That's just a coincidence," Ben assured her. "You looked vaguely

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familiar to me up at the ranch today, but I didn't remember where we'd met before."

"You're not in league with Shanty?"

"Of course not—I don't even know the man."

"He was a bartender at a place I worked down in Texas. It was just my bad luck that he found me."

"Your husband knows nothing of your past life?"

"No. He's not what you'd call an understanding man."

"But you didn't give Shanty the money he wanted?"

"I didn't have it. Gus controls the money."

"What will Shanty do now?"

"Tell Gus and the newspaper." She walked off the porch and headed for the horse and buggy parked out front. "That could drive Gus to murder."

"You think he'd *kill* Shanty?"

"More likely he'd kill *me*."

Ben arrived at the office of *The Buffalo Creek Banner* promptly at five o'clock. He had no intention of mentioning Maxine to either Colonel Daggert or Thelma, but Thelma brought up the subject. "Mrs. Clayton stopped by to see the Colonel a while ago," she informed Ben. "I don't know what about."

Colonel Daggert glanced up, his green eyeshade reflecting the overhead lanterns. "It was just some business," he told her. "Nothing to do with the headless horseman."

As Thelma and Ben set off on their horses, he asked her, "Did a man named Shanty stop by your office this afternoon, too?"

"That thin man staying with Mrs. Jenkins? I don't believe so."

They rode to the spot where they'd met the previous evening, close to Buffalo Creek. "What makes you think the headless horseman will appear two nights in a row?" Ben asked.

Thelma smiled. "It's just an idea I have. You'd think it was stupid."

"Come on, tell me."

"I checked the dates of his other appearances over the past few months. Every time it was the night before *The Banner* went to press."

"Perhaps Daggert's the headless horseman, trying to boost circulation."

She burst out laughing. "But everyone in town reads *The Banner* already!" They dismounted and waited together as twilight descended over the hills. "It occurred to me that whoever's behind it

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might be after the publicity. With publication delayed a day this week, I thought he might try a second appearance."

"Are there other trails up to the Clayton ranch?"

"Oh, sure. But this is the main one, and this is where he's usually been seen."

They'd been waiting about twenty minutes, with the darkness growing thicker, when they heard the hoofbeats of an approaching horse. "Someone's coming!" Ben said. They both turned.

Then they saw it—the charging horse, with its eerie headless rider, coming straight toward them down the trail. But just before it reached them, the rider toppled backward out of the saddle, hitting the ground hard.

"We've got him now!" Thelma shouted, running forward.

But Ben saw the spurting blood and grabbed for Thelma's elbow, catching her and whirling her around, pressing her face to his chest before she realized what she was really seeing.

Sheriff Lane, a big man with a greying walrus moustache, found the head on the ground about a hundred feet up the trail. "It's Gus Clayton," he announced glumly, holding a torch above the grisly remains. "I thought that looked like his horse."

"It's a clean cut," Ben said. "Something just whisked it off as he rode."

Thelma was busy making notes, though she'd avoided any close inspection of the body. "How could he have stayed in the saddle after it happened?" she asked the sheriff.

"Well, the horse was going fast and he had a good grip on it. His body fell off after several seconds, but that was long enough for the horse to travel close to a hundred feet at a gallop."

Ben nodded. "I've known Indians to stretch a rope or wire between two trees to knock riders off their horses. Is there any chance a stretched wire could have taken his head off like that?"

"I doubt it, but anything's possible. There's no sign of a wire, though."

His deputy had brought out a buckboard to carry the body into town and the sheriff rode up to break the news at the Clayton ranch. Thelma decided to ride along. She was *The Banner*'s star reporter and Ben could understand her devotion to duty, but he wanted none of it himself. He left them and rode back into town, following along after the deputy and the buckboard.

Thelma had asked him to deliver the news to Colonel Daggert

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when he reached town, and that was his first stop. The Colonel was wiping his ink-stained hands, straightening up from the printing press. "I finally got her fixed. Where's Thelma?"

"With Sheriff Lane. She said to tell you Gus Clayton's been killed."

"What?"

Ben quickly filled him in on what he knew. "She's up at the ranch with the sheriff now. She said to clear page one for her story."

"I don't understand. Was Clayton the headless horseman all along?"

Ben didn't think so. "The original one is still out there, and maybe he's a murderer now as well."

He went back to Mrs. Jenkins' boarding house and found her playing cards at the kitchen table with Shanty. Ben eyed the boarder and said, "I thought you might have ridden up to the Clayton ranch after your scene with his wife this afternoon."

"Thought better of it," Shanty mumbled, studying his cards. "Sent a message instead."

"We just started the game," Mrs. Jenkins said. "Want to join us?"

"No," Ben told her. "I've got some things to sort out in my room."

In the morning, Ben found Thelma at *The Banner* office, finishing her story. "What a night." She sighed with relief and passed the first page of the story to him.

"Gus Clayton Slain in Grisly Killing," he read. "Wife Collapses on Hearing News." He skimmed quickly down the rest of the page. "Well known local rancher Gus Clayton, 47, was mysteriously slain while riding near his ranch last evening. His wife Maxine collapsed and had to be carried to her room by ranch foreman Rudy Wingate. This reporter, investigating recent sightings of a so-called 'headless horseman' near the Clayton ranch, was confronted with a horse charging down the hill like a cavalry steed, bearing the decapitated body of popular community leader Gus Clayton seconds after the murderous deed was accomplished."

Ben looked up at Thelma. "You have a good writing style. It's a bit flowery, but good."

"I suppose you're an expert. I'm surprised you can read. Most cowhands have trouble in that department."

"I learned at an Indian school in New Mexico."

"You're a long way from home."

"I've always been a long way from home."

Colonel Daggert bustled in and grabbed the story from Ben, barely

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glancing at it as he moved to the trays of type. "Hello, Mr. Snow. Still in town, I see."

"Heading south anytime now," Ben assured him. "I can't stand the excitement of Buffalo Creek."

"We don't have things like this every day. Thelma, let's have a few hundred words updating the headless-horseman sightings, including Mr. Snow's the other night. I'll run it at the bottom of page one."

"Good idea."

She got to work and Ben wandered out, aware of his dismissal from the workplace. Down the street he saw young Kenny Lane hurrying toward the newspaper office. Ben smiled as he passed the youth. "All the trouble settled between you and the Colonel?"

"Yes, sir. I fixed that screw for him and got the press running again last night. The new issue will be out today."

Ben spent the rest of the morning listening to talk about the killing. "One of Clayton's ranch hands probably done it," went one theory. "You know they had to drink in their bunkhouses? He'd never let 'em come into town."

"If you ask me, that whole place is haunted out there. I wouldn't go near it."

Ben listened and said nothing.

By noon, people were waiting for the appearance of *The Banner*. Ben could see Colonel Daggert through the office window, cranking the press by hand as the printed pages rolled out. "Mr. Snow," a voice behind him said and he turned.

"Hello, Mr. Shanty. How are you today?"

"I heard about what happened last night. You were there, they say."

"That's right."

"Was anything found on Clayton's body? A note, maybe?"

Ben studied the emaciated man with mixed feelings. He might have been a canny blackmailer—was he also a cold-blooded killer? "Do you mean the note you sent him, Mr. Shanty? About his wife?"

"You were listening yesterday."

"I couldn't really help it. You saw me come onto the porch."

"I didn't know you'd been standing there listening—what I said to Maxine was between her and me!"

Shanty's eyes had turned a little mad and Ben's hand dropped casually to his gunbelt. "Well," a voice interrupted, "if it isn't my

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two star boarders!" It was Mrs. Jenkins, returning from shopping and carrying a copy of *The Banner*. "Be careful," she cautioned, showing it to them, "the ink's still wet. I stopped by the office to get it."

"Gus Clayton Slain in Grisly Killing," Shanty read aloud.

"That's right," the landlady said. "I'm hurrying home so I can read all about it."

"Is Thelma Blake at the office?" Ben asked her.

She nodded. "Her and the Colonel and Sheriff Lane's boy are taking turns running the press."

Back on the porch of Mrs. Jenkins' house, Ben listened to her read through the article. "Listen to this! 'This reporter, investigating recent sightings of a so-called "headless horseman" near the Clayton ranch, was confronted with a horse charging down the hill, bearing the decapitated body of popular community leader Gus Clayton.' What does that mean, decapitated?"

"Without a head," Mr. Shanty replied quietly.

"My God! No wonder poor Maxine fainted when they told her the news. I feel like I might faint just reading about it."

When she'd finished, Ben took the paper and carefully read through Thelma Blake's story himself. He decided that, come dark, he would pay one more visit to the Clayton ranch.

The barbwire fence that ran along the boundary of the place seemed both higher and thicker than necessary just for the protection of cattle. In the gathering twilight, Ben was wondering if he'd have to cut through it when he saw a rider approaching. He ducked down, fearing one of Clayton's cowhands had discovered him, but then he recognized Thelma Blake, riding tall in the saddle like a man.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her.

"I followed you, of course." She slid quickly out of the saddle. "When I learned you were still in town, I figured you were planning another little expedition out this way."

"I have to be alone tonight. I'm going through the fence."

"I can help you. I can pull the barbwire apart enough for you to fit through. We used to do it as kids."

"You were smaller then."

She put on her riding gloves and carefully pried apart a section of the wire. "Come on—in you go!"

Ben slipped through and then held the wire while she followed.

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"What have you been doing with yourself since the paper came out this afternoon?"

"Getting ready for next week. The Colonel says we'll print an extra edition if there's a good enough reason for one. I guess he means if I find Gus Clayton's killer."

"Any luck so far?"

"Did you know that Mr. Shanty, the man you room with, paid one of the livery-stable kids to ride out here yesterday with a message for Gus? It was in a sealed envelope so he didn't know what it said."

"I suspected something of the sort from a conversation I overheard."

"Gus might have come in at dinnertime and found the message. It could have prompted him to ride out at dusk."

"Was Mrs. Clayton home at the time?"

"I don't know. She was there with Wingate when the sheriff and I arrived."

They made their way across the wide stretch of grazing land, in the direction of the large barn. Though the darkness was almost complete, they could make out the figures of the cowpokes, some of them bound for dinner at one of the bunkhouses.

"Seem like a lot of men for not many head of cattle," Ben muttered as they drew closer.

Suddenly Thelma gasped. "Look there!" Straight ahead, illuminated by the lantern light from the barn, a horseman in black made ready to ride. He had no head. "It's the headless—"

Ben covered her mouth with his hand as they moved closer. There was a second man, who seemed to be speaking to the headless rider, and it was he who first spotted their approach. He yelled and pointed, and the rider in black turned toward them. He spurred his horse and came at a gallop.

Ben just had time to push Thelma out of harm's way when the charging horse hit him a glancing blow, sending him sprawling. He rolled over in the dust, clawing for his gun, as the other man ran up. The headless figure had dismounted and was trying to grab Thelma. Ben kicked out at the other man and managed to trip him up. As he went down in the dust, Ben landed a solid punch to the jaw that finished him for the moment. Then Ben was on his feet, leaping onto the headless figure, pulling him away from Thelma. There was a grunt from within the dark shirt and Ben aimed a punch there. Then he yanked at the shoulders and was rewarded when they came away from the rest of the body.

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Thelma gasped. "It's Rudy Wingate, Clayton's foreman!"

"No surprise there," Ben said, pulling off the shirt to reveal a padded frame that reached above Wingate's head. "The shirt has an open-weave in front so he can see through it when he's riding."

"But why?" Thelma asked Wingate. "Were you trying to scare people?"

"Tell her about it, Rudy," Ben said.

"Go to hell!"

Ben got a grip on the foreman's arm and twisted it. "Then suppose you show us the inside of this barn. I have a feeling that'll solve the mystery." He propelled Wingate forward toward the oversized building.

The barn had been carefully constructed against the side of a hill, and as soon as they entered they saw the real purpose of Clayton's ranch: the narrow-gauge track, the small gondola cars full of rocks, and the gaping hole in the side of the hill lit by hundreds of lanterns and torches.

"It's the entrance to a mine!" Thelma gasped.

"Of course," Ben told her. "After the killing of Chinese coal miners up in Rock Springs, Clayton must have decided to keep this mine a secret and employ regular cowhands to work it. That's why he needed as many as a hundred men, and why they weren't allowed to do their drinking in town where they might talk too much. Wingate's headless-horseman getup was designed to scare people away from this area, though with you it had the opposite effect."

"All this for some coal?"

"No. Judging from the rocks they're bringing out of there, this isn't a coal mine."

Maxine Clayton entered the barn at that moment, carrying a rifle. "Gold, not coal," she told them. "It's my husband's gold mine. What are you two doing here?"

Ben shoved Rudy Wingate aside. "We just came on your foreman all dressed up for his ride."

"That was Gus's idea, not mine. You're still trespassing."

"Can we speak with you privately?" Ben asked, gesturing toward a small group of cowhands who'd gathered around.

"*You* can—not her. I don't want anything more in the paper."

Ben left Thelma and walked toward the mouth of the mine with Maxine. She tossed her rifle to one of the men and fell into step beside him. "A gold mine," he marveled, smiling at her. "It's not every bar girl who marries a real gold mine."

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"This one did, and I plan to keep it. No more headless horsemen and no more secrecy, but I'm keeping the mine."

"You're forgetting that someone murdered your husband."

"Try asking Mr. Shanty about that. Rudy tells me the letter he sent threw my husband into an absolute rage yesterday."

"You weren't at home?"

She blushed slightly. "After I confronted Shanty at Mrs. Jenkins' place, I went to *The Banner* office to keep Colonel Daggert from running the story when he received Shanty's letter. I was on my way back to the ranch when Gus was killed. Too bad I took the other trail."

Ben nodded. "Maxine, is it all right if the paper runs a story about the gold mine and your husband's attempts to keep it secret?"

"I told you it's no longer a secret. And with Miss Blake there, I couldn't keep it a secret if I wanted to."

They went back to join Thelma, and Ben told her, "Good news. I think the Colonel will be putting out that extra edition tomorrow."

Thelma was up much of the night writing her story about the gold mine and identifying Rudy Wingate as the headless horseman. When Ben met her at *The Banner* office next morning, she looked tired but elated.

"It's going to be *The Banner*'s first extra edition since I've been here. The Colonel's already setting the type."

Ben walked over to the racks of type, watching the publisher work. "You're fast, Colonel."

"I gotta be. Back in New York City, they have Linotype machines now, but Buffalo Creek doesn't even have electricity yet. Everything's done by hand here."

"You've got strong hands, Colonel. Strong arms."

Their eyes met. "What are you sayin', Mr. Snow?"

"You must have been deadly in the war, and against the Indians, leading a cavalry charge with your sword drawn. Riding at top speed against an enemy coming just as fast, a blow from a cavalry sword could probably take a man's head off."

Daggert put down the stick of type he'd been working on and reached for another. "Go on, Mr. Snow."

"The original lead in Thelma's story about Gus Clayton's murder mentioned his horse charging down the hill like a cavalry steed. That phrase was removed from the printed version, and she told me you do all the editing and typesetting yourself. You didn't want any

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mention of cavalry that might remind people of your particular skill."

"I didn't like the phrase, that's all."

"Then there was the matter of young Kenny Lane. When I got here just after the killing, I found you with ink-stained hands and you told me you'd finally fixed the press. It was a good alibi for the time of the killing, but the next day Kenny told me he'd fixed the screw and got the press running. That was while you were out killing Gus Clayton."

The publisher's fingers were moving fast over the type box. "Now why would I do that?"

"To protect Maxine Clayton. She knew her husband would be in a murderous rage when he got Shanty's letter, a rage directed at her for the life she'd once led. Somehow she felt you'd help her. I won't ask you why. You rode up there with her to meet Gus, to make him see reason. You met him on the trail. He was riding down in search of her. While he raged at you, she slipped past and rode on to the ranch."

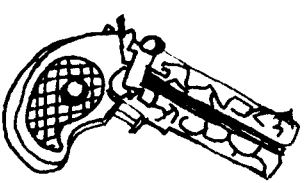
Colonel Daggert's fingers seemed to fly over the stick of type. "We argued. He hadn't seen Maxine and he broke away from me toward town. I'd brought my sword along for protection, and I raced down the other trail, beating him to the bottom. He wouldn't listen to reason—he was going to shoot her on sight. I drew my sword and charged back up the hill, near where you and Thelma were waiting. When I met him on the curve, I swung the sword with all my strength. Gus's horse kept going and I saw the horrible thing I'd done."

"What now?" Ben asked.

Daggert raised his voice. "Thelma, there's going to be a new lead on the story. You'll have to write some new opening paragraphs."

And then Ben read the line of type the Colonel had finished setting. It was headline type and he had no trouble reading it backward:

PUBLISHER CONFESSES TO CLAYTON MURDER



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THIRTEEN

by R. L. STEVENS

Renger looked up from the crude map on the table before him and studied the newcomer with critical eyes. "You're Hallman?"

"That's right."

"They tell me you're a good man with a gun."

"I get by."

"Then I guess you're the man we need for this job. Ever used an automatic carbine?"

"Plenty of times."

"Like this one?" Renger asked, bringing out a new Plainfield carbine very much like the standard military weapon. "It uses thirty-shot clips. All right?"

"Fine." Hallman glanced around at the five other men in the room. The only one he knew was Asmith, a part-time heroin pusher who'd been in and out of prison. He nodded to him and waited for Renger to introduce the others.

"That's Crowthy and Evans and Asmith and Galliger and Yates. A damn good team for this job. But we needed a good man with a gun—somebody who's not afraid to use it."

"That's me," Hallman said. He had earned the reputation.

"Good! We'll have smoke bombs and stuff, but I'm not kidding myself that we're going to get in there without killing a few people."

"What about guards?" Hallman asked. "And patrol cars?"

Renger pushed back his greying hair and stabbed at the map with a pencil. "The only guard you need to worry about is right here. Take him out and it's smooth sailing. Now, a patrol car comes down this street about once every hour. We're timed to miss it, but we can't be sure. All I can tell you is that Crowthy here will be covering you from across the street. If the patrol car surprises us, you'll have to deal with it."

"I understand," Hallman said.

"Your job is to take out this guard, get into the place, and fire a few shots. Create confusion. Make them think we've got a whole army out here. Then I'll toss a few smoke bombs and the rest of us will move in."

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Asmith spoke up from his corner. "What about the getaway?"

"We'll leave the truck at this point and go the rest of the way on foot. Afterward each of you will have to get back to the truck on your own. Evans will stay with the truck as a lookout. But at ten o'clock we pull out. Anyone not back to the truck by ten, we figure they're caught. Any questions?"

As they went over the plan step by step, Hallman found his attention wandering. He was twenty-four years old, and already he had the reputation of being good with a gun. Anyone who bothered to check his record would know he was equally good with a knife. The first man he'd ever killed had been with a knife, and he still remembered the expression of shock in the man's eyes as Hallman's blade slid deep between his ribs.

That was the way it had been the other times, too, though he remembered that first one best of all. Sometimes he had not even seen the men he'd killed. They'd merely been figures to be gunned down at a distance, or sometimes men to be blown up in their beds by a well tossed bomb. And people knew that Hallman was an expert. They came to Hallman when the killing had to be neat and swift and efficient.

"All right," Renger said. "It's set, then. We go at dawn."

The men nodded silently and left the room. There was very little conversation, and Hallman was glad of that. He wasn't much of a talker.

The early morning was usually best for a job of this sort, Hallman had discovered. It was especially good if you could hit a place just a few minutes before eight, when people were arriving for the day's work. The patrol cars were generally off the road then, too, changing crews for the day tour.

This morning was especially good, because a light mist from the river hung over the streets of the town. Evans had parked the truck an hour earlier, and they'd come the rest of the way on foot, moving singly to avoid attracting attention. The town was quiet, with only a few people moving about, when Hallman poked his head around a tree across the street from their target.

The first thing he saw was the uniformed guard by the gate. He seemed to know everyone who entered, though occasionally he glanced at a pass when it was held out to him. The holstered revolver at his side presented no difficulty to Hallman, who could have, if necessary, killed the man from across the street.

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Hallman broke from cover and walked directly toward the guard, carrying the carbine casually in his left hand, pointed at the ground. The man didn't notice him until he was almost up to him, and then the guard's hand dropped uncertainly to the holstered revolver. "You need a pass here," he said. "A pass."

Hallman smiled and kept walking toward the man, as if he didn't understand the language. When he was close enough he brought his right arm up quickly to the guard's throat, plunging his knife deep into the flesh. The man went down with the gurgling sound they always made. Already, before the guard hit the ground, Hallman swung his automatic carbine up to cover the doorway ahead of him, and that was almost a fatal mistake.

From behind him he heard Crowthy shout a warning, and he whirled to see the patrol car traveling fast down the street. They'd already spotted him and screeched to a stop. Crowthy fired a quick wild shot and retreated toward the woods. Two officers jumped out of the car and one of them fired three rapid shots at Crowthy's retreating back.

Hallman saw him topple in the dirt as Hallman brought his own weapon up. He fired a quick burst, dropping one officer in his tracks as the other dived behind the patrol car. A third man, the driver, started out his side and then fell back, bleeding from the shattered windshield.

Hallman moved backward into the building, firing as he went, and saw the second officer fall over. Then he was inside, running down a dingy hallway, ramming another 30-shot clip into the weapon. He hoped the others would be coming soon.

A man appeared ahead of him at the end of the passage, like a pop-up target in a shooting gallery, and Hallman sprayed him with bullets. Then he ran on into the first room, firing quick shots to clear the way. He'd got the rhythm of it now, the half forgotten feel for killing that left him at times but always returned.

In the second office a screaming woman was hunched in one corner, covering her face. Hallman paused only an instant, and then fired a short burst into her body. She slid down the wall, torn and bleeding and already without life. She was the first woman he'd ever killed and he was surprised at how little it bothered him.

He smashed out the window in a front room, seeking the others, and saw two more uniformed guards running around the front of the building. He fired fast, cutting them both down with a line of bullets across their backs. Then he saw the others break from the cover of

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the trees. Renger was in the lead, running with his gun ready, and he hurled a smoke bomb as he crossed the road. Then someone on the floor above cut loose with three quick shots and Hallman saw Yates stagger and go down in the street, just before the smoke obscured him.

Hallman found the stairs and started up. A figure appeared at the top and Hallman let go with the rest of the clip. Before he could reload, a second man fell on him with a roar, toppling him backward halfway down the steps. He felt the carbine slide away from him, but he rolled over and managed to get his knife out. He plunged it into the fleshy man's side, heard his grunt of pain, and plunged it again. The man went suddenly limp and Hallman rolled his body down the stairs.

There was shooting below him now, and he knew Renger and the others were past the gate. He made it the rest of the way to the top of the stairs, finding his weapon and then reloading it as he climbed. He burst through the door at the top landing and killed the man at the window with a sudden spray of bullets. Two others—short, frightened men—raised their hands and backed against the wall. Hallman shot them both.

He could feel the warmth of blood on his lower lip now and he realized the man on the stairs had landed some damaging punches. But there was no pain. The exhilaration of the moment had blotted it out. He glanced out the window, but the smoke was too thick to see anything.

Leaning against the wall, he tried to remember how many he'd killed. The guard, and at least two of the three in the patrol car, and the man in the passage. And the woman. The two guards out the window. And the two on the stairs. And three in this room. That made twelve in just under five minutes. Fast work. Good work.

He took out his knife again and made sure they were dead. He was on his last clip of bullets, so he couldn't waste any more. Then he heard someone coming up the stairs, calling his name. It was Renger, carrying two suitcases. Hallman licked the blood from his lip, savoring it, and went to meet him.

"You did a damn good job," Renger told him. "You're a regular one-man Army!"

"I said I was good with a gun. How many men did we lose?"

"Crowthy and Yates. The others are all right. Let's plant these explosives and get the hell out of here!"

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They did their job, working fast, and then left the building with the others.

"Damn," Renger said as they started across the muddy road toward the shelter of the woods, "I'm going to see that you get a medal for this, Hallman!"

"Thank you, Major."

"When they hear back home how you led an attack on the enemy's forward command post and helped destroy it almost singlehanded, they'll make you a hero. How many did you kill?"

"Twelve."

"Damn good shooting!"

They passed the enemy patrol car, parked at a crazy angle on the road, and Hallman saw that the driver was still alive, gasping for breath behind the shattered windshield. He raised his carbine with one hand and killed the man with a single shot.

"That makes thirteen," he said, and walked on.

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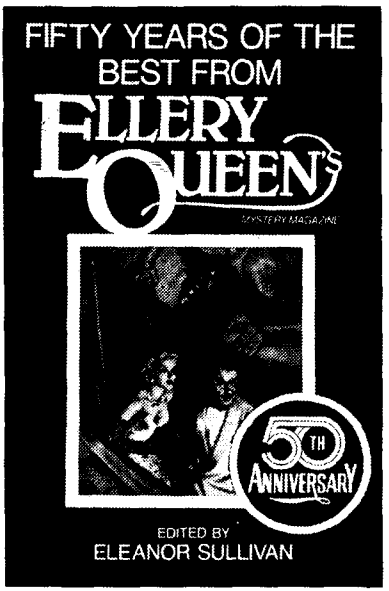

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a *NEW* Baytown story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

In Baytown, East and West were rivals in playground activities. There always used to be a hotly contested field day at the end of the summer with ribbons and a lot of hurt feelings. Now, all these years later, Milt Stafford felt as if he was on enemy territory when he crossed the footbridge and headed up into the unfamiliar streets . . .

A LOT OF HURT FEELINGS

by WILLIAM BANKIER

"Jess, come inside!"

Milt Stafford kept his voice down because it was nearly midnight. His sister was two lawns away, walking slowly, shoulders bent, making narrow sweeps with her flashlight across the grass. He would have to go and get her, he could not allow her off the leash. His whole reason for being back in Baytown was because Normie Belmont had telephoned him and asked him to do something about Jess's weird behavior. And Normie was more than just an old schoolmate nowadays. He was the new chief of police.

Milt tried once more, a throaty hiss into the autumn night. "Jess?" She was on her knees now, parting the grass like a cat owner stalking fleas. He swallowed the last of his gin and set the empty tumbler on the card table beside the screen door. Then he let himself out and took fast steps across their lawn and the one next to it. He reached Jess's side, crouched beside her, lost his balance, and put a hand on her shoulder. It was like leaning against a tree.

"You can't do this," he told her.

"I'm almost finished."

"It freaks the neighbors."

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Yesterday, when he showed up from Toronto, she had explained what she was doing. They discussed all the particulars from Belmont's verbal report. She could have put Normie's mind at ease, she said. She was searching for a green earring. She had dropped it when, as kids, they used to play Red Light and Giant Steps after supper.

"That was twenty-eight years ago," Milt said. "It won't be here."

"You're probably right," she conceded. "But what if it is?"

Normie had told Milt Jess was now attending choir practice on Thursday nights, sitting in the church hall where the old man, Sam Stafford, had lifted his glorious tenor voice almost until the day he died, a year ago. She came week after week and held a hymn book, but never sang a note. The others were becoming spooked.

Jess had her reason. "I'm listening for echoes of Father's voice." She said this with a confident smile, doll's eyes shifting in the big, pale face. She could have been reciting one of the poems she wrote. Good poems, Milt thought, if only she could concentrate on developing her talent. Instead of believing she was perfect the way she was.

Jess's other transgression, according to Normie Belmont, was her attendance at Pine Street School on the morning when the mothers showed up with their kids for first day of new term. She sat on one of the tiny chairs among the children while the women tried not to notice her. When Milt confronted her on this one, Jess said she didn't remember being there. But she went on to recall the morning when she was six years old and her father took her to register because Mom was working. Ancient days were being confused with the present in Jess Stafford's mind.

Milt took the flashlight from her. "Let's go in." He led the way back to the grey stucco cottage, shining the light straight down behind him like an usher at the Bay Cinema.

They sat at the kitchen table. The back door was open. Milt could smell rotting apples concealed in deep grass around the tree behind the garage. She asked him if he felt like another drink and he said why not, getting his glass from the porch and making himself a gin and tonic after he poured his sister a beer. Not good for her to drink this much. Himself, either, for that matter. But at least it pinned her down inside. "I'm not letting you off the hook," she said.

"Come again?"

"My latest poem. I intend to recite it for you."

"That's no imposition."

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"It's about Father."

"Ready when you are."

No poem followed. Topics fizzed up out of her mind like the bubbles in Milt's drink. "Know why Normie Belmont spends so much time inside that police car? Because he's so short when he gets out of it. Bonita wears flats all the time because she's tall. Opposites attract. There's dog dirt all over the lawns, you have to watch out. I could never live in Toronto."

Jess's reference to Bonita Callaghan made Milt's heart beat a little faster. He would be seeing her tomorrow night after a lot of years away. Supper at Normie's place would be stressful, with the inevitable questioning about his progress curbing his sister. The reward would be a couple of hours staring at Normie's wife, Bonita.

"Remember the milkman's sleigh? We loved to see him coming up the street. But it must have been hard work for the horse. If a horse is exhausted and all it does is ache from a hard life, what's the option? Do we put it out of its misery?"

"We can't ask the horse."

"I did."

"What?"

"Asked him if he wanted to go on. Everything was so hard for him. He wasn't having any fun."

"What are we talking about?"

"Father." Jess pushed her glass to one side and folded her hands over the wet spot where it had been. "He was depressed. He hated the way he looked—spotty skin, veins. He couldn't eat anything he liked. And he was waking up early and lying there."

"Never grow old," Milt said.

"Or if you do, get help. They've threatened to close Centralia Zoo. The elephants are bored."

Her silence was a kind of alarm. Milt sensed it, as if a timing device had switched off ticking, just before the explosion. He said, "Are you all right?"

"Dearie me, no." She began to weep. Those big smooth cheeks could display a lot of tears.

"I feel guilty," he said. "I'm away in Toronto, you were here looking after the old man. It was tough on you. Finding him dead on the floor must have been a shock."

"I put him there."

He wanted so much to let it go. He considered pretending her statement had not penetrated. But he said, "You what?"

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She reached for a cupboard door under the sink and opened it. He saw a jumble of plastic bags from the fruit department at the market. "I held one of these over his head until he stopped breathing. He was sitting on the toilet with the lid down. When he was dead, I lifted the bag off and let him fall forward onto the floor. As if he'd suffered a heart attack."

That was the medical examiner's judgment—heart failure. It was what Sam had been taking medication for, it was what the doctor wrote on the death certificate. Milt stared at his sister's face. She was not about to laugh and tease him for swallowing this preposterous joke.

"I took the key from inside the bathroom door. I went out into the hall, closed the door, and locked it. Then I called to him." Jess raised her voice. "Daddy? Are you in there, Daddy? When he didn't answer, I broke in the door. There he was on the floor, dead from a heart attack. I put the key back into the inside keyhole. Then I went and called the police."

After a long silence, Milt said, "It must be true."

"It should be legal."

"It isn't."

"They should have places where people can go if they want to die. Remember the movie *Soylent Green*? Edward G. Robinson ending his life?"

"Jess, quit it."

"There are thousands of people hanging on, being kept alive. The misery. I think it's what's causing the wickedness, all the beating and shooting. We never had that before they started the business of putting tubes in people. The atmosphere is poisoned by the agony of sick people being kept prisoner."

"Did you put a plastic bag over his head?"

"They ought to change the law."

"What am I supposed to do, Jess? I have to deal with Normie Belmont. If I tell him what you did—"

Later, when he remembered this part of the evening, Milt would realize his sister sounded most sane when she was expressing her ideas about euthanasia. And he found himself arguing. "If it was legal, the abuses would be horrible. You'd have thousands of murders. People would kill their old folks to get the estate and they'd say, 'She was tired of living, we helped her go.' "

He would have to decide what to do. Either he could pretend this conversation never took place, or he could tell Normie Belmont.

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There would be some sort of hearing, maybe a trial. Jess would end up being committed. And he could go back to Toronto and get on with the essential business of selling Excello Baking Products to the restaurant trade. Whatever happened, he would never forget his sister's confession.

"Are you ready?" she said.

"For what?"

"My poem. I finished it last week."

"Okay, get it."

"It's all up here." She rapped her head with her knuckles. "Tell me what you think. Remember, it's about Father." She began to recite in the bell-like voice that had not changed since Milt was seven and Jess was twelve and she had read aloud a chapter from *The Hobbitt* each night before he went to sleep.

"I blame you for the silence.
You were the one who thought it was okay
For your entire life to wind from reel to reel
And you would never say,
'I love you, daughter Jessica.'
You got your praise
On the days when you stood up to sing,
And the townspeople clapped their hands,
Proclaiming, 'Sam Stafford, we love you!'
Can you hear me?
It was your fault
That I was never encouraged to state the obvious:
'I love you, Father.'
There, I've said it. But the bottom line
Must be what Mother used to say. And it always
Drove you up the wall.
Here it is, Sam—
'Too little, and too late.' "

After a considerable silence, Milt said, "I'm touched."

"I did what I did because I loved him," Jess said. "You aren't going to tell Normie Belmont, are you?"

Milt walked to Normie's house on the West Hill, giving himself plenty of time so he could arrive unsteamed in his blue suit, shirt, and tie. In Baytown, East and West were rivals in playground activities. There always used to be a hotly contested field day at the end of the summer with ribbons and a lot of hurt feelings. Now, all

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these years later, Milt felt as if he was on enemy territory when he crossed the footbridge and headed up into the unfamiliar streets.

Normie owned a corner house, a big ranch-style bungalow on a half acre of grass with several fully grown trees. A chainlink fence enclosed more ground to the rear. As Milt moved up the front walk, a pit bull lying in wait hit the fence like a fighter plane leaving the deck of an aircraft carrier. Milt could see flying saliva in the light from the picture window.

Normie opened the door in blue pants and pale-blue uniform shirt, the top three buttons undone over what had become a barrel chest. Glass in hand, he grinned into the night. "Come on in. Never mind Chainsaw, his bark is worse than his bite. Which still leaves a lot of room for plastic surgery. How the hell are you, Milt?"

"Good to see you again, Norm." With no extra pounds on his lanky frame, Milt aimed a finger at Normie's gut.

"What'll you have? Beer okay? Okay. Hey, Bonnie, come on out! You were right, he's wearing a suit!"

Bonita Callaghan Belmont emerged from the kitchen in a shiny pale-green dress, open in front, skirt just above the knees. Even in flats, her legs were great. The long black hair Milt remembered was now shoulder length. The Spanish Armada skin still showed its summer tan.

"Hey, Milton!"

"It's been a long time." He took her hand and they were so close he had to kiss her on the cheek. "You look sensational."

"Not so bad yourself."

Making a noise like a police siren, Normie came into the room carrying two glasses of beer. "Are you married yet?" he asked Milt. "All of a sudden it seems important."

"Still a bachelor. As my Montreal colleagues would say, *un vieux garcon*." He accepted a beer. "The French get it right, don't they. A bachelor *is* an old boy. It suggests immaturity." Once in a while, Milt liked to be self-deprecating.

"Don't knock it. You avoid a lot of grief staying single."

"Come on, Norm," Bonita complained. She had found her glass on a side table. There was a different edge to her voice, resilient, one of the gang. Milt remembered her as a girl whose feelings could be hurt.

"If the women were all like Bonita," he said, "all the men would be married."

"If it's going to be like this," the host reacted, "let's eat."

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They helped themselves from a buffet. There was a chicken casserole and rice and a tossed green salad and an uncut loaf of french bread. The bottle of Italian white wine was gigantic—Milt needed both hands to heft it and spill some into an oversize glass.

They perched on chairs in the dining area. "This is delicious," he said. It was.

"Bonnie gets it from the deli," the police chief explained. "Well, hey, she works all day. Now the kids are out of here."

Milt had been catching glimpses of young faces in frames. "How're the kids?" He was told by their mother that they were doing fine, the boy in Montreal at the head office of an insurance company, the girl studying music in London. "You must be proud." Bonita responded with no words, just a huge grin that vanished when she glanced at her watch.

They were halfway down the wine bottle when Normie said, "So. How did it go with your sister?"

"She's okay. There's a boring explanation for each of the silly things she's been doing." He was not going to report the plastic bag, apparently. "For example, the flashlight business." He talked for a few minutes, playing down the weirdness. "She'll be okay. She needs rest, which she'll get now that I'm here. Maybe tranquilizers."

"How long do you intend to stick around?" Bonita was clearing away plates. Milt watched her moves.

"I took three weeks."

"We could drive out to the dunes. Normie? The lake is fabulous with nobody there."

"Freeze your butt in that wind," Belmont vetoed.

"All he does," Bonita stood with one hip higher than the other, "is shoot pool at Lafferty's, where I can't go." A car horn sounded outside. "Here they are." She made a quick run down the hall and came back with a cardigan sweater. "Let's talk on the phone, eh?" She hurried outside, car doors slammed, tires squealed, they were gone.

Normie's grin was locked on. "Thursday nights they go to a movie. They are such dumb bitches. I won't let them in the house."

"You don't know how lucky you are."

"Luck? Has nothing to do with it. I make the right moves."

Milt took in everything—the house, the wife and kids, the prestigious job—when he said, "You've got it all, Norm." But he wasn't envious. The chief was a prisoner. Chasing villains in Baytown had to be boring. His big case this autumn was Jess Stafford creating

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a public nuisance. Most of what he did was probably paperwork. And *where* was he? Marooned on the very same streets where he had grown up. Too late now to make a positive move.

Whereas Milt had kicked off the chains years ago. Toronto was major league. And his roots were not deep. If he wanted to migrate, he could do it.

The problem with Jessie was peripheral. It could never tie him down because his responsibilities lay elsewhere. He was here to do what he could to straighten her out, but his sister's difficulties were her own. In three weeks, he would be long gone.

Normie switched to whiskey. That left Milt to do what he would with the wine. Inevitably, they got onto the subject of Baytown High School football. The year they won the trophy, Milt had surprised everybody with his ability to catch passes. The ball seemed so accessible. He would run his pattern, turn, and it would be there, floating within reach. He would simply put his hands on it, gather it in, and keep running. They positioned him at flanker and he was catching ten, fifteen passes a game. His stats that final year won him a scholarship to Queen's University.

But something happened in the college game. The defenses keyed on him. They bumped him coming off the line. And whenever he caught the ball, a defensive back would put his helmet in Milt's ribs and knock him flat. He began looking out for the defenders. Sometimes he wasn't where he should be when the pass arrived. Sometimes he fumbled when the hit came.

So Milt never talked about his brief career at Queen's. He and Normie were reliving the season when Baytown High ran away from their Central Ontario Secondary Schools opposition.

"Tell you what." Normie took a bite of whiskey. "Lew got to throw the ball and you got to catch it because I kept knocking down their defensive end before he could get to Lew."

"True as hell, Norm. You were some kind of blocker." Milt had been fairly unaware of Norm Belmont on that team. He was not their biggest man, was never first string. He came in and played about half of the big game when Baytown's best offensive guard wrecked his knee. Milt remembered a wild-eyed Normie in the huddle with blood pouring from his nose.

"Hey." Normie advanced on his visitor and held his glass in Milt's face until Milt had no choice but to clink his glass against it. "Didn't we beat those guys? Didn't we chase 'em the hell off the field?"

"Then we beat 'em again in the alley." It wasn't true, but they

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laughed hard. During the season, there had been after-game scuffles where the cars were parked. But not this time. The championship game was too well supervised for any such tribal activity.

Normie found a bowl of pretzels and began filling his mouth while he guzzled whiskey. It was hot inside, so they went out into the patio, a slab of unpainted concrete with wooden deck-chairs and a table. Normie locked the pit bull in the garage and hurried back. The football topic was talked out. "Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Feel free."

"Are you gay?"

"What?"

"You're not married. I just wondered. Got a girl friend?"

"Several."

"I just wondered." The police chief was looking triumphant. His chin glistened. "I'm married. To the girl you couldn't handle. I heard all about you, Stafford."

"Heard what?"

"The Sadie Hawkins Dance. You and Bonita."

"Are you still hung up about that?" When he was in twelfth grade, sixteen years old, Milt had been surprised and somewhat frightened when Bonita Callaghan, the school's knockout girl, invited him to the annual Sadie Hawkins Dance. Normie Belmont had been sniffing around her all year, trying to monopolize her at tea dances in the gym, sitting beside her in Assembly. Milt had realized at the time how jealous the chunky little athlete was. But now? "You must be hard up for things to worry about," Milt concluded.

"Who said worried? Bonnie told me you never laid a hand on her. Never tried. Big lover, walking around the school like God's gift."

Bonnie had delivered him home, as Sadie Hawkins tradition demanded. Milt remembered asking her in. It was late, the family were in bed, they had the downstairs to themselves. They sat close on the sofa, Milt with his arm across the back of it, not quite touching her, Bonita turning the pages of a magazine on her lap. She wet her thumb to take each page, they flicked across. Milt was not focusing, and wondered if she was. She was wearing lilac perfume. He was sweating, paralyzed.

He said, "Would you advise sixteen-year-olds to jump in the sack?"

"You never made a move."

"You've got kids of your own."

"My kids know what to do."

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Milt got up. He couldn't feel the floor under his feet. Drunker than he had been in years, he was suspended above the concrete deck. "You're pathetic, Norm. Chief Greb dies, so they make you chief in this one-horse town. But you're still this runty little guy who has to come on strong."

"Siddown."

"I get the feeling Bonnie's bored to death. She's a quality woman. Can't you handle it?"

"Your crazy sister. What do you intend to do about her?"

"Jess is all right."

"If she keeps on trespassing, I'll have no choice. I'll have to run her in."

"And I'll sue you for false arrest. She's never hurt anybody."

"Oh, touchy! Now I've got you figured out. It isn't my wife—you couldn't make it with her. It's your sister."

"Sick mind, Norm. Must be the booze."

"Siddown and have one."

"If tonight is anything to go by, I give you six months before they take out your liver."

Normie got to his feet. He placed his glass on the table with an elaborate bow. When he turned, Milt took a step backward. He lost his balance and had to shift his feet to correct it. The policeman laughed. "You're the one who's drunk."

"And not afraid to admit it. I'm going home."

"What got to you? The truth about you and Bonita? Or about you and your sister?"

"There's no truth. Not from a lying bastard like you."

"Say it again?"

Too late, Milt realized Normie had been getting ready to hit him for the past hour. He saw the fist, the arm held away from the body. But he repeated it anyway. "Lying bastard."

The punch took him on the side of the head, in front of the ear. Milt went down hard. The back of his head struck concrete. He saw a flash of light. Then he was coming back to consciousness, aware of Normie kneeling beside him. There was a feeling of separation in his skull, and his teeth hurt.

"Let me up."

"You weren't supposed to fall, Milt." Normie was assisting him, a powerful grip under his arm. "Do you need a doctor?"

"I want to go home."

"What were we arguing about?"

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"It isn't the end of the world."

"Let me get out the car."

"I'd rather walk."

Milt felt the pavement sloping under his feet. He had to run to keep up with it. Concrete slammed into his elbows and his chin. There was that light again.

"Are you all right, mister?"

They were kids, a boy and his girl friend. The reek of wine made an explanation unnecessary. "Heading home," Milt mumbled.

They steadied him upright. She brushed the torn knee of his suit. He set sail again with them watching him onto the footbridge.

The bridge was narrow. A hand on either railing guided him across. Now he was on familiar territory—Front Street, with Bridge Street leading up onto the East Hill. He staggered off the sidewalk, tacking up the deserted roadway.

Milt knew his brain was cutting in and out. He saw one landmark, then missed two. How much was the booze, how much the blows to his skull? Should see a doctor. But not tonight. Sober up and assess the damage tomorrow.

As he reached the house, Milt saw a pale light low to the ground at a distance up the street. It swept from side to side. Jess was on the track of her crackerjack earring. He couldn't deal with his sister now.

Inside the house, he bounced off walls on his way to the bathroom. He closed the door, turned the key, switched on the light. He stood, hands braced on the sink, shoulders hunched, hanging his face in front of the mirror. His skin was pale and coated with sweat. There was dried blood on his chin from the fall in the street. He looked like something lifted out of a head-on collision.

The image swam. Another blackout was coming on. Milt shifted himself to the toilet and sat down on the lid. He braced his feet, put his elbows on his knees and his cheeks on his fists. Darkness was balanced just above his eyes, like an untidy load on a narrow shelf. It began to spill, flooding down, blacking him out. He was weightless . . .

He could hear a rapping sound. He heard it again. His cheek was on the tile floor. He wanted to open his eyes, but he couldn't raise the lids. He wanted to call for help but his lips refused to move. He realized now that he was badly hurt, he needed professional help.

Jess was outside the door. She was walking away. He heard her

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in the kitchen. He heard her open a cupboard door and rummage among plastic bags. He blacked out again.

The sound of her pounding fist brought him around once more. "Daddy?" He heard that self-assured tone in her voice, absolutely certain of whatever it was she had decided to do. "Are you in there, Daddy?"

Then she began breaking in the door.

DETECTIVERSE

ELUSIVE DUDE

by R. C. SHEBELSKI

So slick was the crook they pursued
That the cops were forced to conclude:
"On each suspect we pick,
The darn charges won't stick
And we're fast becoming unclued."

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EQMM 50TH ANNIVERSARY CONTEST

Another five questions of the fifty are listed below—to be submitted with all the other questions and answers when the final five are published in the October issue. Good luck! The rules and other information regarding the contest are on the facing page.

26. Who wrote the article, "Watson Was a Woman"?

27. Who did Sherlock Holmes refer to as "The Woman"?

28. Name two short stories in which the evidence in a crime is eaten?

29. Name their authors.

30. Speaking of food, who is Joyce Porter's gluttonous police inspector?

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First Prize: Limited-edition poster of *EQMM*'s first cover
Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen, edited by Eleanor Sullivan, published by Carroll & Graf
Ellery Queen 50th Anniversary mug
The option to appear on a cover of *EQMM* with a celebrity of the winner's choice who agrees to said cover

Second and Third Prizes: Limited-edition poster of *EQMM*'s first cover

Fourth through Thirteenth Prizes: *Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen*

Fourteenth through Twenty-third Prizes: Ellery Queen 50th Anniversary mugs

The winner will be the top scorer in answering 50 questions related to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*—there will be 5 questions an issue from January through October 1991. In case of a tie, the earliest postmark will determine the winner. The deadline is October 15, 1991—entries should carry a postmark no later than that date.

All 50 questions must be submitted as a unit, the pages or copies of the pages for all ten issues together. Material sent in sections will not be considered. Only one entry will be allowed per person. All entries must include the contestant's legal name and full address. No entries will be returned, even if accompanied by a return envelope. Winners will be notified by mail and announced in the March 1992 issue. (No phone calls, please.)

Contributors to *EQMM* are not eligible to win the contest, nor are employees and their immediate families of Davis Publications, Inc., Carlson Promotion Group, or any of their affiliated agents, advertising, and promotional production agencies. All applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations apply.

By entering the contest, all prize winners agree that Davis Publications and any of their respective agencies, affiliates, and employees shall have no liability for any injury, loss, or damage of any kind resulting from acceptance, possession, or use of any prize. Prizes are not transferable and are unreturnable. Davis Publications reserves the right to substitute a prize for one of equal or greater value and is not responsible for lost, late, damaged, or misdirected entries.

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"Hey," piped up Sam, turning to his mother, "when Dad hits the big time, can I get a car?"

Roberta's eyes grew dreamy. "Can I go to Europe on my summer vacation?"

Suddenly Bob parted his steepled hands. He raised them for silence. "That's enough now. It's time to play the game."

"Your father's right," said Joyce. "We can have dessert later." Turning to Phil, she added deferentially, "If that's all right with you, Mr. Boyd."

John M. O'Toole has worked as a sheet-music salesman, assistant editor, high-school teacher, and library acquisitions assistant. He currently lives in Chicago . . .

PLAYING THE GAME

by JOHN M. O'TOOLE

At quitting time, the new electronics engineer, Bob Hilbert, sticks his head inside my office. It's a Company head, all right, from the razor-cut hair to the clean-shaven jaw. He was hired just last week and I've been assigned to help him fit in. He has rolled down his sleeves after a hard day's work and is fastening the zircon link in a starched French cuff. "Dinner still on?" he says a bit apprehensively.

"You bet," I grin, grabbing my coat.

On our way to the parking lot, Bob barely speaks. I figure it's shyness. After all, he's still green and I'm something of a Company legend. He climbs into his Chevy and I ease into my Porsche and the Chevy leads the way through a snarl of downtown traffic. I've promised Bob that someday, if he toes the ol' line, he'll be driving a shiny new Cadillac. And living in the suburbs, instead of in a rented city flat.

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Not that the building doesn't have certain charms. A canopy entrance, electric torches flanking the gothic doorway. The rest of it is liver-colored brick, on a street of duplexes and low-rent townhouses. We enter the lobby and I notice with approval that the elevator is one of our Company's models. But Bob has to push the button twice, and when the door finally opens the car isn't there. Needless to say, I'm embarrassed for the Company. Nothing but a dark, empty shaft.

When the car at last descends, I promise Bob that I'll personally send an engineer out to fix it. He promptly reminds me, sounding somewhat hurt, that he, the Company's brightest new star, is quite capable of fixing it himself. On our way up to the fourth floor, I choke on my faux pas.

My social discomfort is relieved by Bob's wife. She welcomes me into their humble apartment as though I were Prince Charles. Joyce Hilbert is in her mid-to-late thirties, tall and slim, her auburn hair boyishly cut. She introduces me to the children, an attractive pair of teenagers named Sam and Roberta. Sam's hair is dark and artfully tousled. He shares his father's lean face and prominent Adam's apple. Roberta has an auburn ponytail, her mother's oval face and pink complexion.

The children are extremely well mannered, but as we crowd around the dinette table their formality fades, and as though I were their long-lost uncle they ply me with questions: "Were you a hippie in the Sixties?" "Do you like Heavy Metal?" "Did you cry when John Lennon was killed?" My answers provoke quite a lively conversation, enhancing the delicious dinner Joyce has prepared.

I notice, though, that Bob is neither talking nor eating. He has formed a steeple with his hands above his plate and is staring into space, his shoulders hunched. Attempting to coax him out of his shell, I ask Joyce what she thinks of her husband the genius.

Before answering, Joyce swallows a dainty bite of meatloaf. "Bob's a late bloomer," she says, as if I don't know this already from his file. I know quite well he took his doctorate at forty, but good manners force me to let Joyce continue. "He joined the Army to learn electronics, but they made him jump out of airplanes instead."

"Going down," I joke.

When nobody laughs, I attempt to explain. "Going down. Elevators. He designs elevators."

Suddenly they all get it and burst into laughter. All except Bob.

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He is staring at his plate. His daughter Roberta is playing with her ponytail. "Daddy's going *up* now," she chirps.

"Hey," pipes up Sam, turning to his mother, "when Dad hits the big time, can I get a car?"

Roberta's eyes grow dreamy. "Can I go to Europe on my summer vacation?"

Suddenly Bob parts his steepled hands. He raises them for silence. "That's enough now. It's time to play the game."

"Your father's right," says Joyce. "We can have dessert later." Turning to me, she adds deferentially, "If that's all right with you, Mr. Boyd."

"Call me Phil," I insist. "Of course it's all right."

We adjourn to the living room and Bob sinks leadenly into his armchair. Joyce and the children seat themselves excitedly on the broken-down sofa. I perch myself on a wooden straight-back and try to look comfortable—patiently waiting for Bob to stop staring at his lap and making steeples with his hands. Waiting for the game that he mentioned to begin.

The living-room furniture is hand-me-down. The mantelpiece is empty—no bric-a-brac, no photos. The bookshelves bear nothing but a television guide, though I haven't seen any TV in the place. There are, however, several large boxes sealed with movers' tape on the bare wood floor and I assume that the Hilberts haven't finished unpacking.

Between the teenagers' heads, I can see through the window. No curtains or drapes—not even a windowshade. Through the pane several yards away is the building's west wing, and that is the extent of the Hilberts' fourth-floor view. Below, as I noticed upon entering the flat, is a small concrete courtyard full of trashed furniture.

"Okay," says Bob, leaning slowly forward in his chair. "Let's get started." He pulls a large glass ashtray across the coffee table. He takes from his suitcoat a billing-size envelope. He tears it open carefully and empties from it three small scraps of paper, each folded to the size of a baby's front tooth. The folded scraps land in the ashtray and Bob scrupulously mixes them around with his finger. Then he pulls one out, unfolds it, gazes at it a moment.

"It says 'Sam,' " he murmurs.

Sam complains nasally. "Aw, Dad—"

His father cuts him off. "Rules are rules, son."

"Aw, hell—all right."

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"Watch your language," chides Joyce.

Sullenly, Sam rises till he's standing on the sofa cushion. He ducks to keep from bumping his head on the ceiling. The sofa springs squeal as he turns and bends down toward the window. The muscles bulge in his wiry arms as he tries to jar the old window sash loose. He pulls the window open, its warped wood barking, screeching, paint chips fluttering down onto Joyce's and Roberta's heads. Chilly gusts barge in and I find myself shivering.

Sam extends his arms through the blustery opening. He counts to three and takes a deep breath.

Then, with a shriek, he jumps out the window.

The muffled thud from below makes me cringe. I swallow hard, my face perspiring heavily despite the frigid air now filling the room. Lips tense, eyes unblinking, I watch as Bob leans his elbows on his knees and covers his face with his hands.

Joyce is sobbing softly in a corner of the sofa, her lace hankie peeking between delicately tapered fingers. Roberta has twisted herself around and is gazing out the window. She spins back to face me, her ponytail flying. A smile takes a moment to form on her face, the corners of her mouth rising nearly to her cheekbones, the upper lip stretching low over perfect front teeth. "Far out!" she says.

"That's the spirit!" I return her smile, wiping my forehead with my monogrammed handkerchief. Recovered now from the inevitable shock, I heartily applaud the whole family. "I must say I'm impressed. *Damned* impressed," I announce.

"Never mind you," mutters Bob into his hands. "What about the Company? Will *they* be impressed?" I detect a note of bitterness in his tone. I chalk it up to nerves and let it pass.

"They sure as hell will," I tell him. "You've passed the Company's loyalty test. With flying colors, I might add. I'll be filing a glowing report on you folks." I take a cigar out. I offer it to Bob. He waves it away, so I light it myself. Joyce, my ever-thoughtful hostess, pauses in her sobbing to shove the ashtray across the coffee table toward me.

"The boy balked a little," I remind them, "but I can overlook that. The important thing is, he played the game. He jumped. And none of you tried to stop him, or even talk him out of it. I'll be sure to mention that." I puff with satisfaction on my cigar. I blow a few smoke rings, then beam at the three remaining Hilberts. "You're a Company family. You've proven that tonight. You're our kind of people. You're going places, Bob."

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"Forgive me," sniffles Joyce, lowering her hanky. "A mother's emotions." She does her best to smile. It turns out looking sheepish. "*You* understand, don't you, Phil?"

"Of course," I assure her. "After all, we're not monsters."

Roberta is bouncing up and down on the sofa. "God, it's all so *exciting,*" she squeaks. "Does everyone at the Company have to do this, Mr. Boyd?"

"Oh, yes," I reply.

"Even you?"

I try not to smile at the girl's naivete. "Even me," I tell her. "I lost my dear wife when *I* was first hired. The Company said if I drew her name she should throw herself in front of a bus. So she did. She wanted success so badly for me. She figured she'd get off with a few broken bones." I pause to shake my head at my late wife's unfounded optimism. "Anyway, today I'm Head of Personnel." I blow a smoke ring, catch it on my pinky.

Roberta can barely sit still from excitement. Then abruptly she settles, her eyes open wide. Her ponytail thrashes as she glances out the window and quickly back at me. "What about the cops?" she says, her tone now more frantic than chipper.

I wave a cloud of rich-smelling smoke from my face. "What about them?" I say. "No crime has been committed—except, of course, suicide. But nobody forced him to jump."

Joyce has dried her tears. Her makeup is a mess, but she is doing her best to wear a genial expression. "I hate to sound crass," she says, "but how much do you think Bob's raise is going to be?"

"I'm recommending ten thousand. They'll talk me down to eight."

"Bob!" exclaims Joyce. "Did you *hear* that? *Eight thousand!*"

"Mm hm," nods Bob, his face still in his hands.

I grind out my cigar against the folded scraps in the ashtray. "So," I say, slapping my knees, "let's have that dessert."

As we're heading back into the dining room, the front door slowly opens and, to everyone's surprise, young Sam comes staggering in. His face and arms are badly bruised, his hair quite a bit more tousled. He is limping but apparently otherwise unharmed. At first I think I'm seeing a ghost—and so do the Hilberts, judging from their collective gasp and the way their jaws have dropped like trapdoors.

But the boy is no ghost. He's a living, panting body in a garbage-smeared Black Sabbath T-shirt and bluejeans. His mother rushes

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over and tearfully embraces him. His sister Roberta, her shock wearing thin, now seems a bit disappointed.

"Oh, my God," cries his mother, "you're alive!" Then, turning to me, she says through her tears, "Does this mean Bob doesn't get his raise?"

"Not at all," I laugh, slapping young Sam on the back. "The boy jumped out the window. That's all that really matters. It's the spirit that counts at the Company."

My slap on the back has given young Sam a coughing fit. His father leads him limping to the sofa and helps him lie down. Bob leans concernedly over his son, stroking the lad's rumpled hair. "What happened?" says Bob. "Good God in heaven, that fall should have killed you!"

Sam stops coughing long enough to explain. "I landed on a stack of old mattresses," he wheezes.

"Lucky boy," I chuckle. "Good thing the neighbors dump their furniture down there."

Bob turns to face me. At first he looks understandably angry, but the anger soon fades, and before long he's wearing his regulation Company smile, lips parted wide, his upper teeth perfectly aligned with his lowers. "We're sure as hell glad you could drop by for dinner, Phil."

"My pleasure, Bob." I shake his hand warmly. Then I take his gentle hint and show myself out.

The hallway is dim. Several of the overhead globe lights have burned out. As I stroll past the apartment doors I can smell ethnic cooking. Mexican. Italian. Pungent Indian curry. I stifle a belch from Joyce's lovely meatloaf and search my pockets for my antacid tablets.

The elevator is taking forever to arrive, but, after all, it's Friday evening in a twelve-story building—people are no doubt coming and going. I begin to wish *I* had someplace to go other than my lonesome bachelor quarters.

Suddenly I find myself missing my wife. I shrug and tell myself that's the price of success. I made it to the top. I can't complain.

I'm trying to unwrap the roll of antacid tablets. Memories of my wife keep nagging me. I'm weary from the session and eager to leave. When the elevator door finally opens, I quickly step inside.

Onto thin air.

The Company won't tolerate such outrageous incompetence. As

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I fall, I spot the elevator descending high above me. If I live, I'll track down the s.o.b. who installed it. Whoever he is, he's no Company man!

DETECTIVERSE

ABOUT SLAMMING YOUR PARTNER

by DOROTHY BELLE POLLACK

They were partners in marriage and bridge,
  Which may or may not be good.
Their hearts belonged to the game—
  They played as much as they could.
But he just couldn't bear to lose
  And he started berating her plays,
The which was vastly unfair—
  As a player, she merited praise.
He bawled her out often and yelled,
  Her bidding, he said, was a mess:
"You can't make a slam!" he raved,
  "You can't even make a finesse!"
Just a decent bid, he begged—
  She had had enough of his thunder,
So she gave it to him in spades
  And now he is six feet under.

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The bus driver was real understanding and nice about waiting for the police to come over, but he did have a schedule to make. He stood there looking at his watch and slapping the door of the bus with his gloves. "Better make up your mind real quick," he said. "Either you stay over like the police say or climb on. This bus goes clear to North Platte tonight."

First story author #689 Harold K. Hagen is a resident of Wyoming and a professor of Fishery Science at Colorado State University . . .

THE WHOLE WAD

by HAROLD K. HAGEN

He could have been sitting next to me at the lunch counter. I don't really know. My mind was on Cheyenne and the rodeo and on the prize money I knew I'd be bringing back to the Salt River Ranch. I do know that I became fully aware of him when his stubby arm shot in front of me just as I was starting to pay for the hamburger and coffee.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, cowboy," he whined. "Going for a toothpick there, didn't notice you was turning back."

He stood in front of me, sucking on the toothpick, rocking back and forth like the spare pin in a bowling alley. There wasn't much you'd remember about him at first, except maybe his nose. It was sort of like a cucumber, full of knobs and lines and stuck over on the right side of his face. I probably wouldn't have noticed the wrinkled suit he wore, either, except for the collar that was turned under. I ain't much for wearing a suit myself, but a thing like that would drive me crazy. I wanted to reach out and pull it straight.

I started toward the door, but he jogged along beside me, trying to be friendly. Actually, you can't blame a man for that. It gets monotonous and lonely riding a bus, especially along Highway 80.

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We stood outside the door of the dirty cafe drenched with the odors of hamburgers and melted cheese that mingled with the exhaust of the bus.

"Got us a half-hour layover, cowboy," he said, scratching his ample stomach. "Might as well stretch our legs. It's been a damn long ride."

Now I don't mind people calling me cowboy most of the time, but there's a certain way of saying it that just don't set. I'd rather not have even talked to this fellow, let alone walk all over town with him, but what can you do? A guy gets friendly and you gotta be decent back. Besides, I was getting a bit woozy from the smells.

He led the way across the street and down toward the railroad track. We ambled aimlessly downhill, looking at the ladies in the cigarette and beer posters that were propped up in the half-painted windows. It seemed that every other building was a bar or a cheap hotel or both. What a hell of a place to live. I was glad that the layover wasn't any longer. Above the noise of the traffic I heard the blast of a diesel way over on the other side of town.

Two blocks down and right across the street from the depot, he stopped and slapped the side of his wrinkled coat. "Out of fags," he bellowed. "Wouldn'tcha know. Just a second, cowboy, I'll be right back."

He wheeled himself through the door of another tavern and disappeared. I started to turn back to the bus station, but for no good reason I waited.

The freight rumbled by, scattering a cloud of paper, dust, and grit halfway across the street. The next minute, he came out, waving his cigarettes and babbling above the clacking of the train.

"Don't smoke, do ya, cowboy?" He ripped open the pack with his teeth. "Smart lad. Wishta hell I hadn't got myself started." He coughed loudly as we rounded the corner and headed back up the side street. Bells clanged at the railroad crossing.

Halfway up the next block, a thin red-headed drunk in brown tweeds staggered out of another bar and reeled our way. He sang at the top of his lungs as he counted a roll of bills. "Ah ha—you gonna let a Canadian buy you a drink, ain'tcha, chums?"

"Well," said my companion, "I'll tell ya now. We've only got us a couple of ten minutes to catch a bus to Cheyenne, and we ain't goin' to miss our bus. Ain't that so, cowboy?"

"That's right," I agreed. I was surprised to hear my wrinkled friend being so logical.

"Oh, you ain't got time to be friendly with a Canadian what's

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willing to buy you chums a drink." The redhead pitched forward, almost tripping over the broken curbing as he flashed his money. "See there. It's American. Good as yours and a real wad of it, too. Struck me something real good before I come down here, I did."

"Tell you what, Canadian," my self-elected traveling companion said, "I'll play you a game of flips whilst we walk up to our bus. Heads you win, tails you lose. Get the idea?"

"How much?"

"Let's try a fiver, okay? See—there it goes." He tossed a coin high in the air, snatching it expertly at his belt line and laying it on his hairy wrist. "Heads—you win! See, us Americans ain't so bad, are we, Canadian?"

He gave me a big wink and punched me in the stomach with his elbow as he handed the Canadian a folded bill.

I tried to walk faster, but the sticky Canadian was holding us back.

"Slow 'er down, chums. Let's flip for the wad. What do you say to that?" He belched loudly and exposed his filthy teeth.

My companion wagged his head. "No."

"Too rich, huh? Couldn't cover no part of it, I'll bet. You'd go for a fiver but don't play for no big stakes, eh, Yanks?"

"Now, wait a damn minute, Canadian. Me and my cowboy pal here could cover your wad easy if we had a mind. Only we got us a bus to catch."

We reached the busy corner across from the bus station and I saw the other passengers standing by the bus. The light changed to red. The Canadian dropped back a few steps and stood on the curb, swaying back and forth as he counted his money.

"I could get us that wad real quick and easy." Small eyes moved from me to the Canadian.

"Let's get out of here," I answered. I felt hot inside and almost panicky. "I don't want any part of that guy or his money. Come on, let's go." The light stayed red.

"So you ain't got no sporting blood, huh, Yanks?" The Canadian staggered up to us again. "Well, move on, then—I'll find me some real sports."

"You can't call us no chickens!" My ruffled companion turned like a gamecock and faced the Canadian head-on as the light turned green.

"Come on, come on," I urged.

It was no use. He puffed and shook his fist at the drunk. "Me and

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my friend has got us a couple of hundred right here." He patted his fat butt. "We'll flip you high as you want. We'll flip you real good." He turned and wheezed in my face. "Just show him some money. Just show him is all you got to do. I won't need none of it 'cept to call his bluff."

Why I did it, I'll never know, but the light was flashing amber on the opposite post. I pulled my billfold from my back pocket and held up a few bills. In the next instant, just as the light changed, my lardy companion grabbed my money and pushed the Canadian backward against the building. Instinctively, I reached to help the Canadian, but he caught himself, so I rushed to the curb just in time for the traffic.

When I caught the glimpse of a grey suit melting into the crowd on the other side of the street, it struck me. What a sucker! These guys were in cahoots and had worked me all the way. What a sap! I turned to grab the Canadian, but he was gone.

In twenty seconds he disappeared, completely faded from sight. I searched the nearby stores and saloons inside and out. No Canadian. No one had even seen a man in brown tweeds. I was out a hundred bucks, my entry money for the bronco riding in Cheyenne.

The bus driver was real understanding and nice about waiting for the police to come over, but he did have a schedule to make. He stood there looking at his watch and slapping the door of the bus with his gloves.

"Better make up your mind real quick," he said. "Either you stay over like the police say or climb on. This bus goes clear to North Platte tonight."

"Climb in," the officer ordered. "I gotta write this up."

I stooped down and dropped my bedroll and roping saddle in the trunk of the police car, hearing the noise of the bus die out.

"It's most likely they'll figure you to go on that bus or maybe the next one." The sergeant sat at the bare desk of the tiny police station, turning a pencil over and over. A cooling breeze from the round wire-covered fan rattled the edges of a calendar above his head. A real curvy blonde was pictured with only a small red umbrella labeled March 1972 covering her most essentials. Five months behind, I laughed to myself, but who'd want to tear that page off?

"If you could manage to stay till morning, we might get us a chance at them." He frowned in thought. "Let's see now—the next bus to Laramie is seven-thirty tonight and then again at six in the

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morning. If you get on the seven-thirty bus and ride to the edge of town, we'll give you a lift back to your room. If they watch the bus, they'll most likely spend the rest of the night boozing it up and figuring how to take the next one."

He looked pleased with himself. "We'll take a look at the railroad station. They could be working both." He sat back in his chair with his hands behind his head and swiveled. "Can't promise you nothing, son, but it's worth the try. Tap a couple of confidence types like that and the word gets out pretty fast that you've got a town to stay clear from. Most people that get suckered in like you just don't like to admit that they've been taken. Usually they move on and hope nobody's going to find out about it. You could help us." He laughed, but it was friendly.

There were sixteen dead moths inside the cracked light fixture above my bed. The radiator against the north wall had twenty-one ribs and the curtains that covered the dirty windows had twenty-seven faded cowhands chasing twenty-six and one-half faded steers. You try to go over your plans real carefully, but after so long you start counting or your mind wanders all over.

Maybe I should have gotten on the bus. Like the sergeant said, when you get suckered you want to forget about it. I wish I didn't get so mad when people cross me up like that, but that's the way I am. There was no real reason to believe I'd see them at all and, if I did, what then?

"Don't try to do it all by yourself," the sergeant had said. "You're big and we don't mind seeing that kind get messed up some, but remember there's two of them and one of you. You just call us, son, soon as you spot them, and we'll take care of them."

He only nodded his head when I mentioned that I had a Belgian .32 with me. "Nice little gun." That was what he said. "Pick it up in Europe?"

"No. Some Frenchy forgot it in Vietnam."

It took forever for time to pass. I wished that I had thought to stop for a newspaper or a magazine before I checked into the hotel, but I didn't want to go back. My feet hurt from walking up and down those hard sidewalks. There wasn't a thing to read in my pockets. I read all the cards in my billfold two or three times and then I made a little game of tossing old ones in my Stetson that I propped up on the little table. You'd think they'd put a TV or a radio in a ten-dollar room, but I guess not in a rundown place like this . . .

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I must have dozed for a little while. The sharp bang of a door down the hall brought me off the bed with a start. I always get sort of dizzy when I jump up from sleeping in the daytime and I sat back on the bed. My mouth was dry and my tongue felt like it was covered with muskrat fur. Damn, what I wouldn't have given for a cold beer right then.

I walked down the hall to the john and noticed the time as I drank a glass of awful-smelling water. Seven-fifteen. I must have slept three hours.

I climbed into the bus just as though I was heading out of town. I told the driver about the deal, but he wasn't too enthusiastic about stopping and letting me keep my ticket until he saw the police car parked on the edge of town with its lights flashing. I eased into the front seat and he slammed the door.

"Now remember what I told you about trying to do it all yourself," the sergeant said as he let me out downtown. "I'm going off duty now, but Harrison's on the desk and he's filled in on what you're up to. Just simmer yourself down. Good luck."

I sat in the back booth of the bus-depot cafe to make sure I saw everyone that came in. The thirty-two in my right jacket pocket seemed heavy. I put my hand on it and checked the safety. I couldn't remember if it was up or down. I wanted to take it out and see, but you can't do that in a cafe. I felt real uneasy during the whole time I ate, not knowing if that safety was on or off. I checked into the john between the chicken-fried steak and the chocolate pudding. The safety had been on all the time.

I killed more than an hour in the place, but there was no sign of the two. By now the bars were busy and that was the most likely place to hunt. In a Wyoming railroad town, there's no end to the bars.

I walked down the same street that we'd explored earlier, only this time I went in each place and looked around. I don't mind hoisting a few myself now and then, but the smells of spilled beer in the hot stuffy bars just didn't sit well with me. I wanted to get back into the fresh air. I cruised each place as fast as I could, trying not to attract attention. I figured a barkeep might just be noticing and could spill the beans about my nosing around. I kept thinking about what the sergeant said, though, and he was right. Those guys probably felt pretty safe. They had no reason to want anyone spotting for them.

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About ten-thirty or eleven o'clock, I checked out the last bar on Front Street without a bit of luck. I leaned against a lamppost, watching a couple of big broads wiggling their behinds toward a bar door, when I decided to get smart. If those fellows were staying around for a while and planned to use the same gimmick, they'd likely use the same place where they made their contact with me. I walked back down the street.

I was nursing my second can of beer in the back booth when I saw them come in. The fat S.O.B. was in the lead, laughing and talking like he hadn't stopped all day. I eased my boot off the seat across from me and hunched over the beer as best I could, but they weren't paying any attention.

The Canadian walked over to a chunky dame sitting at the bar and whispered something to her. She gave him a toothy smile and nodded as the men took their beers and came straight back toward me.

Generally I don't let excitement get too strong a hold on me, but I could hardly wait for them to sit down and start working on their drinks. They sat to my right near the door. My heart pounded so hard in my ears I couldn't hear anything. I sat and sweated—and waited.

Casual as I could make it, I got up and walked over to their booth, my hand inside the Levi jacket pocket. I settled myself down next to the fat one and held my hat in front of the .32 that was pointed right at his stomach.

The Canadian started to bolt, but he saw that I meant business and worked himself back down in the seat. I noticed how their eyes ran wild in their empty faces.

"Cowboy," the fat one squeaked. "I didn't expect—"

"I reckon you didn't," I heard myself say. "I reckon you thought I'd be too scared or embarrassed to do anything except go on to Cheyenne." I shifted forward. "Just so we understand something. I'm not a stranger to this kind a gun. I saw it cut little round holes in the front of a man over in Vietnam where I got it."

I felt confident now and the sound in my ears was their quick breathing and not the pounding of my own blood.

"Let's be reasonable, kid," the Canadian managed. "Ernie and me strung a good one on you, but no harm's done. You can have your money back." He fumbled in his pocket and came up with the wad. He started to peel off a bill.

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"Hold it a minute," I said. "A while earlier you said you'd gamble for the whole wad. Let's just say you lost."

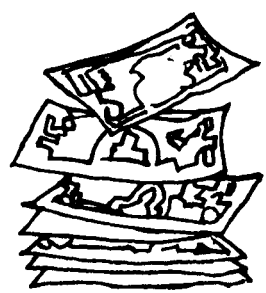
"No!" he protested. "That ain't fair."

"Harrison down at the police station is expecting me to bring you two up to spend the night." I motioned with the gun.

"All right, cowboy, you win." He slammed the roll of bills into my hand.

I walked down the street toward my hotel, feeling a little ashamed but proud, too, of the way I'd handled them. They deserved it. They were willing to take all I had.

The drugstore next door to the hotel was still open and I walked to the news rack. I dropped the two magazines I wanted on the counter and pulled out the roll of money. I peeled the five off the top and then saw it—paper, green paper. The whole wad except for the two on top.



CHANGE IN OUR INDEX PROCEDURE

Please note that EQMM will no longer index the magazine in two parts (January to June, July to Mid-December) but instead will present an index of the entire year in our Mid-December issue. We hope this change will benefit readers casting ballots for our annual Readers Award by providing them with a complete list of all eligible stories in the same issue where the official ballot appears.

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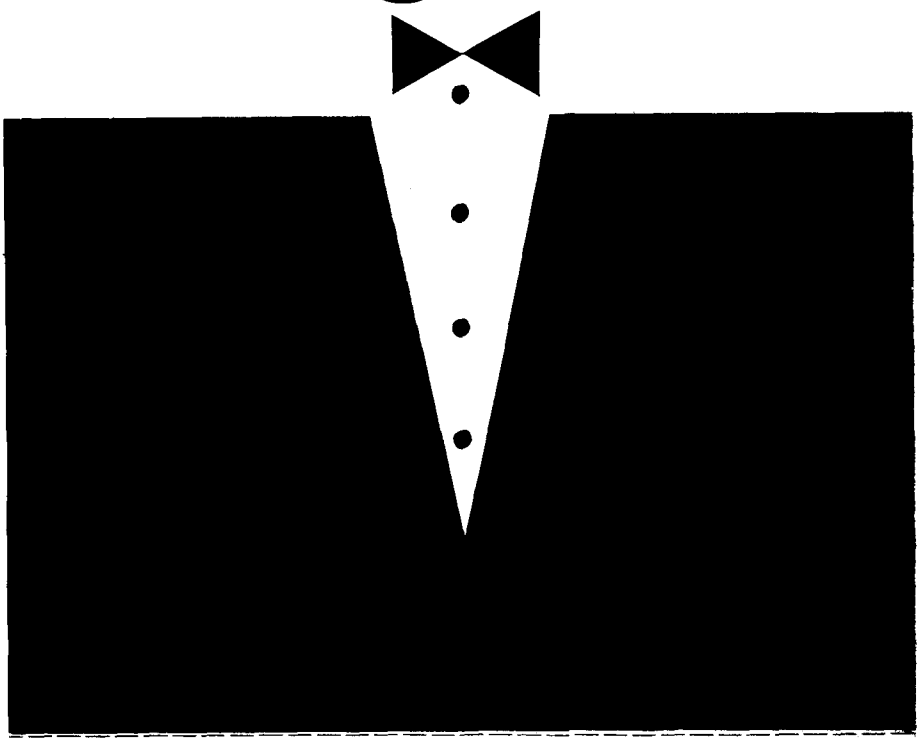

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We publish two double issues in March and October. Each double issue counts as two towards your subscription.

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an award-winning reprint by

DONALD E. WESTLAKE

Last year "Too Many Crooks" won the Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for best short story. The story features career criminal John Archibald Dortmunder, whose brilliance at planning capers is only surpassed by his abundance of bad luck. Dortmunder and his gang have appeared in seven novels to date, among them The Hot Rock, Nobody's Perfect, Good Behavior, *and, most recently,* Drowned Hopes *(Mysterious Press). Each is notable for its humor, fast pace, and the author's unerring ability to make the ridiculous not only plausible but all too possible.*

To learn more about Donald Westlake, who appears on our cover with his wife Abby Adams, turn to page 71—later. First give yourself a treat and read on . . .

TOO MANY CROOKS

by DONALD E. WESTLAKE

"Did you hear something?" Dortmunder whispered.

"The wind," Kelp said.

Dortmunder twisted around in his seated position and deliberately shone the flashlight in the kneeling Kelp's eyes. "What wind? We're in a tunnel."

"There's underground rivers," Kelp said, squinting, "so maybe there's underground winds. Are you through the wall there?"

"Two more whacks," Dortmunder told him. Relenting, he aimed the flashlight past Kelp back down the empty tunnel, a meandering, messy gullet, most of it less than three feet in diameter, wriggling its way through rocks and rubble and ancient middens, traversing forty tough feet from the rear of the basement of the out-of-business shoe store to the wall of the bank on the corner. According to the

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maps Dortmunder had gotten from the water department by claiming to be with the sewer department, and the maps he'd gotten from the sewer department by claiming to be with the water department, just the other side of this wall was the bank's main vault. Two more whacks and this large, irregular square of concrete that Dortmunder and Kelp had been scoring and scratching at for some time now would at last fall away onto the floor inside, and there would be the vault.

Dortmunder gave it a whack.

Dortmunder gave it another whack.

The block of concrete fell onto the floor of the vault. "Oh, thank God," somebody said.

What? Reluctant but unable to stop himself, Dortmunder dropped sledge and flashlight and leaned his head through the hole in the wall and looked around.

It was the vault, all right. And it was full of people.

A man in a suit stuck his hand out and grabbed Dortmunder's and shook it while pulling him through the hole and on into the vault. "Great work, Officer," he said. "The robbers are outside."

Dortmunder had thought he and Kelp were the robbers. "They are?"

A round-faced woman in pants and a Buster Brown collar said, "Five of them. With machine guns."

"Machine guns," Dortmunder said.

A delivery kid wearing a moustache and an apron and carrying a flat cardboard carton containing four coffees, two decafs, and a tea said, "We all hostages, mon. I gonna get fired."

"How many of you are there?" the man in the suit asked, looking past Dortmunder at Kelp's nervously smiling face.

"Just the two," Dortmunder said, and watched helplessly as willing hands dragged Kelp through the hole and set him on his feet in the vault. It was really very full of hostages.

"I'm Kearney," the man in the suit said. "I'm the bank manager, and I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

Which was the first time any bank manager had said *that* to Dortmunder, who said, "Uh-huh, uh-huh," and nodded, and then said, "I'm, uh, Officer Diddums, and this is Officer, uh, Kelly."

Kearney, the bank manager, frowned. "Diddums, did you say?"

Dortmunder was furious with himself. Why did I call myself Diddums? Well, I didn't know I was going to need an alias inside a bank vault, did I? Aloud, he said, "Uh-huh. Diddums. It's Welsh."

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"Ah," said Kearney. Then he frowned again and said, "You people aren't even armed."

"Well, no," Dortmunder said. "We're the, uh, the hostage-rescue team; we don't want any shots fired, increase the risk for you, uh, civilians."

"Very shrewd," Kearney agreed.

Kelp, his eyes kind of glassy and his smile kind of fixed, said, "Well, folks, maybe we should leave here now, single file, just make your way in an orderly fashion through—"

"They're coming!" hissed a stylish woman over by the vault door.

Everybody moved. It was amazing; everybody shifted at once. Some people moved to hide the new hole in the wall, some people moved to get farther away from the vault door, and some people moved to get behind Dortmunder, who suddenly found himself the nearest person in the vault to that big, round, heavy metal door, which was easing massively and silently open.

It stopped halfway, and three men came in. They wore black ski masks and black leather jackets and black work pants and black shoes. They carried Uzi submachine guns at high port. Their eyes looked cold and hard, and their hands fidgeted on the metal of the guns, and their feet danced nervously, even when they were standing still. They looked as though anything at all might make them overreact.

"Shut up!" one of them yelled, though nobody'd been talking. He glared around at his guests and said, "Gotta have somebody to stand out front, see can the cops be trusted." His eye, as Dortmunder had known it would, lit on Dortmunder. "You," he said.

"Uh-huh," Dortmunder said.

"What's your name?"

Everybody in the vault had already heard him say it, so what choice did he have? "Diddums," Dortmunder said.

The robber glared at Dortmunder through his ski mask. "Diddums?"

"It's Welsh," Dortmunder explained.

"Ah," the robber said, and nodded. He gestured with the Uzi. "Outside, Diddums."

Dortmunder stepped forward, glancing back over his shoulder at all the people looking at him, knowing every goddamn one of them was glad he wasn't him—even Kelp back there, pretending to be four feet tall—and then Dortmunder stepped through the vault door, surrounded by all those nervous maniacs with machine guns, and

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went with them down a corridor flanked by desks and through a doorway to the main part of the bank, which was a mess.

The time at the moment, as the clock high on the wide wall confirmed, was 5:15 in the afternoon. Everybody who worked at the bank should have gone home by now; that was the theory Dortmunder had been operating from. What must have happened was, just before closing time at three o'clock (Dortmunder and Kelp being already then in the tunnel, working hard, knowing nothing of events on the surface of the planet), these gaudy showboats had come into the bank waving their machine guns around.

And not just waving them, either. Lines of ragged punctures had been drawn across the walls and the Lucite upper panel of the tellers' counter, like connect-the-dot puzzles. Wastebaskets and a potted Ficus had been overturned, but fortunately there were no bodies lying around; none Dortmunder could see, anyway. The big plate-glass front windows had been shot out, and two more of the black-clad robbers were crouched down, one behind the OUR LOW LOAN RATES poster and the other behind the OUR HIGH IRA RATES poster, staring out at the street, from which came the sound of somebody talking loudly but indistinctly through a bullhorn.

So what must have happened, they'd come in just before three, waving their guns, figuring a quick in and out, and some brown-nose employee looking for advancement triggered the alarm, and now they had a stalemate hostage situation on their hands; and, of course, everybody in the world by now has seen *Dog Day Afternoon* and therefore knows that if the police get the drop on a robber in circumstances such as these circumstances right here, they'll immediately shoot him dead, so now hostage negotiation is trickier than ever. This isn't what I had in mind when I came to the bank, Dortmunder thought.

The boss robber prodded him along with the barrel of his Uzi, saying, "What's your first name, Diddums?"

Please don't say Dan, Dortmunder begged himself. Please, please, somehow, anyhow, manage not to say Dan. His mouth opened. "John," he heard himself say, his brain having turned desperately in this emergency to that last resort, the truth, and he got weak-kneed with relief.

"Okay, John, don't faint on me," the robber said. "This is very simple what you got to do here. The cops say they want to talk, just talk, nobody gets hurt. Fine. So you're gonna step out in front of the bank and see do the cops shoot you."

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"Ah," Dortmunder said.

"No time like the present, huh, John?" the robber said, and poked him with the Uzi again.

"That kind of hurts," Dortmunder said.

"I apologize," the robber said, hard-eyed. "Out."

One of the other robbers, eyes red with strain inside the black ski mask, leaned close to Dortmunder and yelled, "You wanna shot in the foot first? You wanna *crawl* out there?"

"I'm going," Dortmunder told him. "See? Here I go."

The first robber, the comparatively calm one, said, "You go as far as the sidewalk, that's all. You take one step off the curb, we blow your head off."

"Got it," Dortmunder assured him, and crunched across broken glass to the sagging-open door and looked out. Across the street was parked a line of buses, police cars, police trucks, all in blue and white with red gumdrops on top, and behind them moved a seething mass of armed cops. "Uh," Dortmunder said. Turning back to the comparatively calm robber, he said, "You wouldn't happen to have a white flag or anything like that, would you?"

The robber pressed the point of the Uzi to Dortmunder's side. "Out," he said.

"Right," Dortmunder said. He faced front, put his hands way up in the air, and stepped outside.

What a *lot* of attention he got. From behind all those blue-and-whites on the other side of the street, tense faces stared. On the rooftops of the red-brick tenements, in this neighborhood deep in the residential heart of Queens, sharpshooters began to familiarize themselves through their telescopic sights with the contours of Dortmunder's furrowed brow. To left and right, the ends of the block were sealed off with buses parked nose to tailpipe, past which ambulances and jumpy white-coated medics could be seen. Everywhere, rifles and pistols jittered in nervous fingers. Adrenaline ran in the gutters.

"I'm not with *them!*" Dortmunder shouted, edging across the sidewalk, arms upraised, hoping this announcement wouldn't upset the other bunch of armed hysterics behind him. For all he knew, they had a problem with rejection.

However, nothing happened behind him, and what happened out front was that a bullhorn appeared, resting on a police-car roof, and roared at him, *"You a hostage?"*

"I sure am!" yelled Dortmunder.

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"What's your name?"

Oh, not again, thought Dortmunder, but there was nothing for it. "Diddums," he said.

"What?"

"Diddums!"

A brief pause: *"Diddums?"*

"It's Welsh!"

"Ah."

There was a little pause while whoever was operating the bullhorn conferred with his compatriots, and then the bullhorn said, *"What's the situation in there?"*

What kind of question was that? "Well, uh," Dortmunder said, and remembered to speak more loudly, and called, "kind of tense, actually."

"Any of the hostages been harmed?"

"Uh-uh. No. Definitely not. This is a—this is a—nonviolent confrontation." Dortmunder fervently hoped to establish that idea in everybody's mind, particularly if he were going to be out here in the middle much longer.

"Any change in the situation?"

Change? "Well," Dortmunder answered, "I haven't been in there that long, but it seems like—"

"Not that long? What's the matter with you, Diddums? You've been in that bank over two hours now!"

"Oh, yeah!" Forgetting, Dortmunder lowered his arms and stepped forward to the curb. "That's right!" he called. "Two hours! *More* than two hours! Been in there a long time!"

"Step out here away from the bank!"

Dortmunder looked down and saw his toes hanging ten over the edge of the curb. Stepping back at a brisk pace, he called, "I'm not supposed to do that!"

"Listen, Diddums, I've got a lot of tense men and women over here. I'm telling you, step away from the bank!"

"The fellas inside," Dortmunder explained, "they don't want me to step off the curb. They said they'd, uh, well, they just don't want me to do it."

"Psst! Hey, Diddums!"

Dortmunder paid no attention to the voice calling from behind him. He was concentrating too hard on what was happening right now out front. Also, he wasn't that used to the new name yet.

"Diddums!"

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"Maybe you better put your hands up again."

"Oh, yeah!" Dortmunder's arms shot up like pistons blowing through an engine block. "There they are!"

"Diddums, goddamn it, do I have to *shoot* you to get you to pay attention?"

Arms dropping, Dortmunder spun around. "Sorry! I wasn't—I was—here I am!"

"Get those goddamn hands up!"

Dortmunder turned sideways, arms up so high his sides hurt. Peering sidelong to his right, he called to the crowd across the street, "Sirs, they're talking to me inside now!" Then he peered sidelong to his left, saw the comparatively calm robber crouched beside the broken doorframe and looking less calm than before, and he said, "Here I am."

"We're gonna give them our demands now," the robber said. "Through you."

"That's fine," Dortmunder said. "That's great. Only, you know, how come you don't do it on the phone? I mean, the way it's normally—"

The red-eyed robber, heedless of exposure to the sharpshooters across the street, shouldered furiously past the comparatively calm robber, who tried to restrain him as he yelled at Dortmunder, "You're rubbing it in, are ya? Okay, I made a mistake! I got excited and I shot up the switchboard! You want me to get excited again?"

"No, no!" Dortmunder cried, trying to hold his hands straight up in the air and defensively in front of his body at the same time. "I forgot! I just forgot!"

The other robbers all clustered around to grab the red-eyed robber, who seemed to be trying to point his Uzi in Dortmunder's direction as he yelled, "I did it in front of everybody! I humiliated myself in front of everybody! And now you're making fun of me!"

"I *forgot!* I'm sorry!"

"You can't forget that! Nobody's ever gonna forget that!"

The three remaining robbers dragged the red-eyed robber back away from the doorway, talking to him, trying to soothe him, leaving Dortmunder and the comparatively calm robber to continue their conversation. "I'm sorry," Dortmunder said. "I just forgot. I've been kind of distracted lately. Recently."

"You're playing with fire here, Diddums," the robber said. "Now tell them they're gonna get our demands."

Dortmunder nodded, and turned his head the other way, and

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yelled, "They're gonna tell you their demands now. I mean, *I'm* gonna tell you their demands. *Their* demands. Not *my* demands. *Their* de—"

"We're willing to listen, Diddums, only so long as none of the hostages get hurt."

"That's good!" Dortmunder agreed, and turned his head the other way to tell the robber. "That's reasonable, you know, that's sensible, that's a very good thing they're saying."

"Shut up," the robber said.

"Right," Dortmunder said.

The robber said, "First, we want the riflemen off the roofs."

"Oh, so do I," Dortmunder told him, and turned to shout, "They want the riflemen off the roofs!"

"What else?"

"What else?"

"And we want them to unblock that end of the street, the—what is it?—the north end."

Dortmunder frowned straight ahead at the buses blocking the intersection. "Isn't that east?" he asked.

"Whatever it is," the robber said, getting impatient. "That end down there to the left."

"Okay." Dortmunder turned his head and yelled, "They want you to unblock the east end of the street!" Since his hands were way up in the sky somewhere, he pointed with his chin.

"Isn't that north?"

"I knew it was," the robber said.

"Yeah, I guess so," Dortmunder called. "That end down there to the left."

"The right, you mean."

"Yeah, that's right. Your right, my left. *Their* left."

"What else?"

Dortmunder sighed, and turned his head. "What else?"

The robber glared at him. "I can *hear* the bullhorn, Diddums. I can *hear* him say 'What else?' You don't have to repeat everything he says. No more translations."

"Right," Dortmunder said. "Gotcha. No more translations."

"We'll want a car," the robber told him. "A station wagon. We're gonna take three hostages with us, so we want a big station wagon. And nobody follows us."

"Gee," Dortmunder said dubiously, "are you sure?"

The robber stared. "Am I *sure?*"

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"Well, you know what they'll do," Dortmunder told him, lowering his voice so the other team across the street couldn't hear him. "What they do in these situations, they fix a little radio transmitter under the car, so then they don't have to *follow* you, exactly, but they know where you are."

Impatient again, the robber said, "So you'll tell them not to do that. No radio transmitters, or we kill the hostages."

"Well, I suppose," Dortmunder said doubtfully.

"What's wrong *now?*" the robber demanded. "You're too goddamn *picky*, Diddums; you're just the messenger here. You think you know my job better than I do?"

I know I do, Dortmunder thought, but it didn't seem a judicious thing to say aloud, so instead he explained, "I just want things to go smooth, that's all. I just don't want bloodshed. And I was thinking, the New York City police, you know, well, they've got helicopters."

"Damn," the robber said. He crouched low to the littered floor, behind the broken doorframe, and brooded about his situation. Then he looked up at Dortmunder and said, "Okay, Diddums, you're so smart. What *should* we do?"

Dortmunder blinked. "You want *me* to figure out your getaway?"

"Put yourself in our position," the robber suggested. "Think about it."

Dortmunder nodded. Hands in the air, he gazed at the blocked intersection and put himself in the robbers' position. "Hoo, boy," he said. "You're in a real mess."

"We *know* that, Diddums."

"Well," Dortmunder said, "I tell you what maybe you could do. You make them give you one of those buses they've got down there blocking the street. They give you one of those buses right now, then you know they haven't had time to put anything cute in it, like time-release tear-gas grenades or anyth—"

"Oh, my God," the robber said. His black ski mask seemed to have paled slightly.

"Then you take *all* the hostages," Dortmunder told him. "Everybody goes in the bus, and one of you people drives, and you go somewhere real crowded, like Times Square, say, and then you stop and make all the hostages get out and run."

"Yeah?" the robber said. "What good does that do us?"

"Well," Dortmunder said, "you drop the ski masks and the leather jackets and the guns, and *you* run, too. Twenty, thirty people all running away from the bus in different directions, in the middle of

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Times Square in rush hour, everybody losing themselves in the crowd. It might work."

"Jeez, it might," the robber said. "Okay, go ahead and—what?"

"What?" Dortmunder echoed. He strained to look leftward, past the vertical column of his left arm. The boss robber was in excited conversation with one of his pals—not the red-eyed maniac, a different one. The boss robber shook his head and said, "Damn!" Then he looked up at Dortmunder. "Come back in here, Diddums," he said.

Dortmunder said, "But don't you want me to—"

"Come back in here!"

"Oh," Dortmunder said. "Uh, I better tell them over there that I'm gonna move."

"Make it fast," the robber told him. "Don't mess with me, Diddums. I'm in a bad mood right now."

"Okay." Turning his head the other way, hating it that his back was toward this badmooded robber for even a second, Dortmunder called, "They want me to go back into the bank now! Just for a minute!" Hands still up, he edged sideways across the sidewalk and through the gaping doorway, where the robbers laid hands on him and flung him back deeper into the bank.

He nearly lost his balance but saved himself against the sideways-lying pot of the tipped-over Ficus. When he turned around, all five of the robbers were lined up looking at him, their expressions intent, focused, almost hungry, like a row of cats looking in a fish-store window. "Uh," Dortmunder said.

"He's it now," one of the robbers said.

Another robber said, "But *they* don't know it."

A third robber said, "They will soon."

"They'll know it when nobody gets on the bus," the boss robber said, and shook his head at Dortmunder. "Sorry, Diddums. Your idea doesn't work any more."

Dortmunder had to keep reminding himself that he wasn't actually *part* of this string. "How come?" he asked.

Disgusted, one of the other robbers said, "The rest of the hostages got away, that's how come."

Wide-eyed, Dortmunder spoke without thinking: "The tunnel!"

All of a sudden, it got very quiet in the bank. The robbers were now looking at him like cats looking at a fish with no window in the way. "The tunnel?" repeated the boss robber slowly. "You *know* about the tunnel?"

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"Well, kind of," Dortmunder admitted. "I mean, the guys digging it, they got there just before you came and took me away."

"And you never mentioned it."

"Well," Dortmunder said, very uncomfortable, "I didn't feel like I should."

The red-eyed maniac lunged forward, waving that submachine gun again, yelling, "*You're* the guy with the tunnel! It's your tunnel!" And he pointed the shaking barrel of the Uzi at Dortmunder's nose.

"Easy, easy!" the boss robber yelled. "This is our only hostage —don't use him up!"

The red-eyed maniac reluctantly lowered the Uzi, but he turned to the others and announced, "*Nobody's* gonna forget when I shot up the switchboard. Nobody's *ever* gonna forget that. He wasn't *here!*"

All of the robbers thought that over. Meantime, Dortmunder was thinking about his own position. He might be a hostage, but he wasn't your normal hostage, because he was also a guy who had just dug a tunnel to a bank vault, and there were maybe thirty eyeball witnesses who could identify him. So it wasn't enough to get away from these bank robbers; he was also going to have to get away from the police. Several thousand police.

So did that mean he was locked to these second-rate smash-and-grabbers? Was his own future really dependent on *their* getting out of this hole? Bad news, if true. Left to their own devices, these people couldn't escape from a merry-go-round.

Dortmunder sighed. "Okay," he said. "The first thing we have to do is—"

The red-eyed maniac lunged at him again with the Uzi, shouting, "Don't you tell us what to do! *We* know what to do!"

"I'm your only hostage," Dortmunder reminded him. "Don't use me up. Also, now that I've seen you people in action, I'm your only hope of getting out of here. So this time, listen to me. The first thing we have to do is close and lock the vault door."

One of the robbers gave a scornful laugh. "The hostages are *gone*," he said. "Didn't you hear that part? Lock the vault door after the hostages are gone. Isn't that some kind of old saying?" And he laughed and laughed.

Dortmunder looked at him. "It's a two-way tunnel," he said quietly.

The robbers stared at him. Then they all turned and ran toward the back of the bank. They *all* did.

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They're too excitable for this line of work, Dortmunder thought as he walked briskly toward the front of the bank. *Clang* went the vault door, far behind him, and Dortmunder stepped through the broken doorway and out again to the sidewalk, remembering to stick his arms straight up in the air as he did. "Hi!" he yelled, sticking his face well out, displaying it for all the sharpshooters to get a really *good* look at. "Hi, it's me again! Diddums! Welsh!"

"Diddums!" screamed an enraged voice from deep within the bank. "Come back here!"

Oh, no. Ignoring that, moving steadily but without panic, arms up, face forward, eyes wide, Dortmunder angled leftward across the sidewalk, shouting, "I'm coming out again! And I'm *escaping!*" And he dropped his arms, tucked his elbows in, and ran hell for leather toward those blocking buses.

Gunfire encouraged him: sudden bursts behind him of *ddrrritt, ddrrritt*, and then *kopp-kopp-kopp*, and then a whole symphony of *fooms* and *thug-thugs* and *padapows*. Dortmunder's toes, turning into high-tension steel springs, kept him bounding through the air like the Wright brothers' first airplane, swooping and plunging down the middle of the street, that wall of buses getting closer and closer.

"Here! In here!" Uniformed cops appeared on both sidewalks, waving to him, offering sanctuary in the forms of open doorways and police vehicles to crouch behind, but Dortmunder was *escaping*. From everything.

The buses. He launched himself through the air, hit the blacktop hard, and rolled under the nearest bus. Roll, roll, roll, hitting his head and elbows and knees and ears and nose and various other parts of his body against any number of hard, dirty objects, and then he was past the bus and on his feet, staggering, staring at a lot of goggle-eyed medics hanging around beside their ambulances, who just stood there and gawked back.

Dortmunder turned left. *Medics* weren't going to chase him; their franchise didn't include healthy bodies running down the street. The cops couldn't chase him until they'd moved their buses out of the way. Dortmunder took off like the last of the dodoes, flapping his arms, wishing he knew how to fly.

The out-of-business shoe store, the other terminus of the tunnel, passed on his left. The getaway car they'd parked in front of it was long gone, of course. Dortmunder kept thudding on, on, on.

Three blocks later, a gypsy cab committed a crime by picking him up even though he hadn't phoned the dispatcher first; in the city of

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New York, only licensed medallion taxis are permitted to pick up customers who hail them on the street. Dortmunder, panting like a Saint Bernard on the lumpy back seat, decided not to turn the guy in.

His faithful companion May came out of the living room when Dortmunder opened the front door of his apartment and stepped into his hall. "*There* you are!" she said. "Thank goodness. It's all over the radio *and* the television."

"I may never leave the house again," Dortmunder told her. "If Andy Kelp ever calls, says he's got this great job, easy, piece of cake, I'll just tell him I've retired."

"Andy's here," May said. "In the living room. You want a beer?"

"Yes," Dortmunder said simply.

May went away to the kitchen and Dortmunder limped into the living room, where Kelp was seated on the sofa holding a can of beer and looking happy. On the coffee table in front of him was a mountain of money. Dortmunder stared. "What's *that?*"

Kelp grinned and shook his head. "It's been too long since we scored, John," he said. "You don't even recognize the stuff any more. This is money."

"But— From the vault? How?"

"After you were taken away by those other guys—they were caught, by the way," Kelp interrupted himself, "without loss of life—anyway, I told everybody in the vault there, the way to keep the money safe from the robbers was we'd all carry it out with us. So we did. And then I decided what we should do is put it all in the trunk of my unmarked police car in front of the shoe store, so I could drive it to the precinct for safekeeping while they all went home to rest from their ordeal."

Dortmunder looked at his friend. He said, "You got the hostages to carry the money from the vault."

"And put it in our car," Kelp said. "Yeah, that's what I did."

May came in and handed Dortmunder a beer. He drank deep, and Kelp said, "They're looking for you, of course. Under that other name."

May said, "That's the one thing I don't understand. Diddums?"

"It's Welsh," Dortmunder told her. Then he smiled upon the mountain of money on the coffee table. "It's not a bad name," he decided. "I may keep it."

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ON OUR COVER

Donald E. Westake is one of the most versatile and prolific craftsmen in mystery fiction today. Since 1960, he has written over sixty novels under his own name and the well known pseudonyms Richard Stark and Tucker Coe. His work ranges from the wildly humorous to the cold-bloodedly realistic, with marvelous unclassifiable variations in between.

Born in Brooklyn in 1933, Westlake grew up in Albany. He attended local Catholic schools and spent a year at the now-defunct Champlain College in Plattsburgh before serving two years in the Air Force. He has been awarded two Edgars from the Mystery Writers of America, one in 1966 for best novel *(God Save the Mark)* and one in 1989 for best short story ("Two Many Crooks"). Over a dozen of his novels have been adapted for the screen, most notably *The Hot Rock* and *Point Blank* (the latter based on the Richard Stark novel, *The Hunter*), and recenty wrote the screenplay adaptation of Jim Thompson's *The Grifters,* starring Angelica Huston.

With his wife Abby Adams, Westlake constructed a number of murder games for mystery weekends at the Mohonk Mountain House near New Paltz, New York—seven of which were published in book form by Daniel McMillan Publications. Mohonk's famous mystery weekends were launched by Dilys Winn, and it was a photograph of Abby and Donald in bed in Dilys's bestselling *Murder Ink* (1977) that sparked the idea for our cover. In the *Murder Ink* piece, "Living with a Mystery Writer," Abby wrote: "I have been living with the consortium which calls itself Don Westlake for five years now, and I still can't always be sure when I get up in the morning which of the mob I'll have my coffee with."

Abby's *An Uncommon Scold* (Simon and Schuster, 1989) is destined to become a classic. Subtitled "1,000 Quotable Quotes on Subjects from the Preposterous to the Divine Uttered by History's Most Witty and Wicked Women," it ends with brilliant advice from Sophie Tucker: "Keep breathing."

"Q"

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EQMM 50th ANNIVERSARY PARTY

Photographs By Jane Jewell

On January thirty-first of this year, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* celebrated its fiftieth year of publication with a party at the Murray Hill Townhouse in New York City. On hand to celebrate were many treasured guests. Aside from those the camera did catch were Isaac Asimov, Carol Brener, Joan Kahn, Roslyn Targ, Dilys Winn & others.

Eleanor Sullivan and Joel Davis

Mrs. Douglas Dannay, Richard Dannay, Mrs. Richard Dannay, and Douglas Dannay

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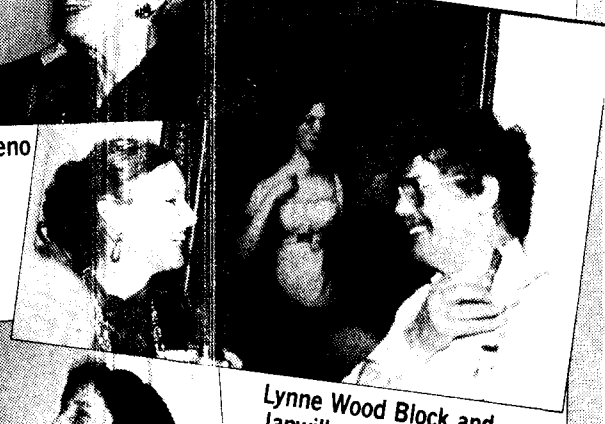
Terri Czeczko and
Peter Papadopolous

Theodore de la Torre-Bueno
and Rose Dannay



Lynne Wood Block and
Janwillem van de Wetering

Lawrence Block and Cynthia
Manson

Russell Atwood and
Robert Twohy

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Donald E. and Abby Adams Westlake and Robert Twohy

Mary Higgins Clark, Mary Tzimokas, and Joel Davis

Daithi O'Ceallaigh, Milo O'Shea, and Kitty Sullivan

Rupert Holmes and Milo O'Shea

Cliona, Antoinette, and Ronan O'Ceallaigh

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Bernie Fierro and Heidi Vanderbilt

Cathleen Jordan and Eleanor Sullivan

John F. Suter, his daughter, and Joel Davis

Ann Bayer

Tai Ellin and Harry Davis

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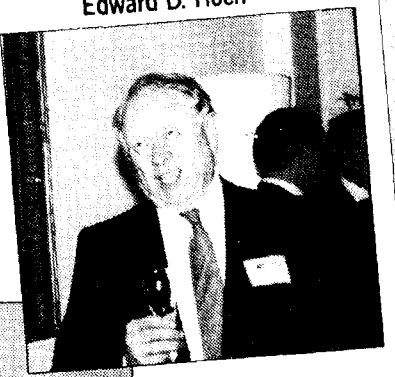
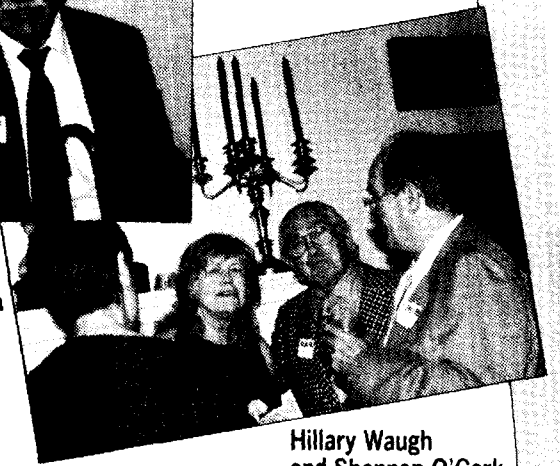
Dorothy Salisbury Davis and Harry Davis

Edward D. Hoch

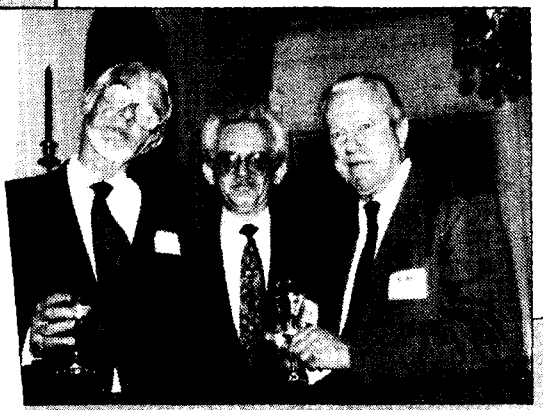


Marilyn Henderson and Al Nussbaum



Eleanor Sullivan, William Targ, and Donald E. Benson

Robert Twohy, A. Bruce Chatterton, and Hillary Waugh



Hillary Waugh and Shannon O'Cork

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

One of the mystery subcategories pioneered by *EQMM* is the use of real historical figures as fictional detectives. Perhaps the earliest and most celebrated example is Lillian de la Torre's long-lived series of Dr. Sam: Johnson stories, the first of which appeared in these pages in November 1943. Breni James made a detective of Socrates in two mid-Fifties stories. Theodore Mathieson cast as sleuth such varied figures as Alexander the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, Daniel Boone, and Florence Nightingale in the stories collected as *The Great "Detectives"* (1960) and went on to give a famous American his first (but far from last) book-length detecting assignment in *The Devil and Ben Franklin* (1961).

With the increasing popularity of "faction," historical sleuths are no longer a novelty, and the tendency may sometimes be to greet them less with delight than with a groan of resignation. Below is a recent example that deserves a more sympathetic reception.

*** Gaylord Larsen: *Dorothy and Agatha,* Dutton, $16.95. The author of a memorable novel confronting Raymond Chandler with a Hollywood mystery, *A Paramount Kill* (1988), now involves Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers in a well wrought Thirties puzzle with its roots in World War I. Part of the fun is guessing which author will play the Holmes role and which the Watson. The story zips along with Larsen's customary storytelling flair; the characterization is acute and the sense of the Great War's painful and unescapable aftermath is quite moving. Among the other Golden Age figures making appearances are BBC drama director Val Gielgud and the sleuthing team's fellow Detection Club members E. C. Bentley and A. A. Milne. I have only one problem: a reader sharp enough to pick up on the principal clue to the murderer may also recognize that it embodies both a sanitization and an anachronism.

*** Robert B. Parker: *Perchance To Dream*, Putnam, $19.95. The book-length, big-money pastiche is nearly as much a commonplace today as the "factional" sleuth, and the taste and ethics of such novels have become a matter of controversy in the mystery field. For Parker to complete Raymond Chandler's *Poodle Springs* as a one-shot was one thing, but essaying a sequel to *The Big Sleep* seems a bit much. Having said that, I have to record that Parker fakes Chandler much better than John Gardner fakes Fleming, Goldsborough fakes Stout, Chastain fakes Erle Stanley Gardner, and all but the half dozen or so best Sherlockian imitators fake Doyle. I especially liked the image of patrons at one of Eddie Mars's gaming tables looking "as if they were watching surgery" (page 139).

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*** Jane Haddam: *Not a Creature Was Stirring,* Bantam, $3.95. As we've noted here before, the paperback original, once a bastion of the hardboiled, can now be the source of mystery fiction at its most classical. In the first of a series of holiday mysteries, former FBI sleuth Gregor Demarkian looks into Christmas murder among the family of the wealthy and eccentric Robert Hannaford, as well as the problems of some of his neighbors in the Philadelphia Armenian community. Well written, well plotted, and particularly well peopled, the novel carries its 287-page length well. Haddam is the unconcealed pseudonym of Orania Papazoglou.

*** Jane Haddam: *Precious Blood,* Bantam, $3.95. The second holiday exploit of Gregor Demarkian (now being billed, to his embarrassment, the "Armenian Hercule Poirot") is an even stronger classical specimen than the first. During Easter week, a maverick Catholic priest dies in an inventive manner, and the suspects include several of his high-school friends, all of whom were involved in a disgusting (and only gradually revealed) incident in Black Rock Park twenty years before. Strong as the puzzle is, the religious background gives the novel its greatest fascination. I'm looking forward to Demarkian's promised Fourth of July and Halloween cases.

*** E. X. Ferrars: *Smoke Without Fire,* Doubleday, $14.95. The author, who debuted in 1940, returns with a typically ingenious classical whodunit starring one of her latter-day series characters, retired botany professor Andrew Basnett, whose Christmas visit to old friends is interrupted by the murder of a neighboring Q.C. As I've written in this space before, the relatively undervalued Ferrars may be the closest approximation of Agatha Christie currently practicing.

*** John Mortimer: *Rumpole a la Carte,* Viking, $18.95. That this latest collection of six stories about Old Bailey barrister Horace Rumpole (and the first in U.S. hardcover) is the weakest of the eight volumes about his exploits won't discourage fans, nor should it. Even lesser Rumpole is one of the best ways to spend an evening, especially since the TV versions of these tales have yet to arrive on PBS. In the final (and strongest) story in the collection, Rumpole does something truly drastic: he appears for the prosecution! [Editor's note: This story is scheduled for an issue later this year.]

Among the reprints is a handsome trade paperback of *Wodehouse on Crime* (International Polygonics, $9.95), the 1981 selection of P. G. Wodehouse tales with a Foreword by Isaac Asimov and a Preface by editor D. R. Bensen. The author's bizarre but internally logical plots and his frequent references to detective fiction have always caused me to think of him as a mystery writer, even when there is no greater crime involved than social deception.

Another notable short-story collection is Margery Allingham's *Mr. Campion and Others* (Avon, $3.95), comprising thirteen tales about

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Albert Campion, who recently has acquired new fans via PBS's *Mystery,* in which he is played—with the ideal casting typical of the series—by Peter Davison. The title has a complicated history. This edition has the same contents as the 1950 Penguin edition.

When one of MWA's Grand Masters publishes a book on the history and technique of detective fiction, both readers and potential writers will want to read it. *Hillary Waugh's Guide to Mysteries and Mystery Writing* (Writer's Digest Books, $19.95) is rich in wisdom and provocative opinion. I recommend it with one caveat: don't swallow his misleading remarks on Earl Derr Biggers' Charlie Chan, who *never* confused his r's and his l's.

Though its author is a recent *EQMM* contributor and the winner of two Edgar awards and its publisher a leading specialist in mystery fiction, there is little about our genre in *Harlan Ellison's Hornbook* (Penzler, $22.95). Still, I recommend this collection of 1970s newspaper columns to any reader fascinated by an original mind and an unfailingly engaging prose style at work on a wide variety of topics. Only the most daring and honest artist could reveal himself in print as fully as Ellison does in his personal essays.

Among the events commemorating *EQMM*'s golden anniversary is a notable anthology, *Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* (Carroll & Graf, $22.95). Eleanor Sullivan selects ten stories each from the Forties, Fifties, Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties with an eye toward tales that have not been excessively reprinted. (For example, the Stanley Ellin entry is not "The Specialty of the House" or "The Question My Son Asked" but the relatively unfamiliar "Reasons Unknown.") Even with fifty spots open, some *EQMM* stalwarts are not represented, but don't ask me who should be bumped to make room for them.

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"Q"

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a *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by

PETER TURNBULL

"I'd like to ask you to accompany us to the mortuary," said Donoghue, interrupting what was beginning to sound like an endless flow.

"Oh."

"We'd like you to view the body. Just the face. You won't see any injuries. In the circumstances, I think that you're the only person who could tell us whether or not the lady is in fact Sadie McLaren."

"I'll get my coat," said the woman.

The latest from Peter Turnbull, whose police procedurals about Glaswegian D.I. Donoghue are among the best being written . . .

LIFE EXTINCT

by PETER TURNBULL

The woman was dead. The knife that had penetrated her heart and had punctured her lungs was still sticking upright in her throat where it had severed the carotid artery. The woman was middle-aged and well dressed in a threadbare sort of way, as if doing as well as possible on a meager stipend. She had not been robbed. Her handbag hadn't been taken and a gold watch remained on her left wrist. These factors Donoghue noted in a brief, few seconds' glance and then nodded. The sheet was replaced over the body.

He turned away from the corpse and lowered himself under the blue-and-white police tape which cordoned off the locus of the offense. He walked over to where Dr. Chan stood. The police surgeon smiled as Donoghue approached him. "Good morning, Inspector."

"Dr. Chan." Donoghue nodded. "Can you tell me anything over and above the obvious?"

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Chan shook his head. "Over and above the obvious, no, I don't think I can, Inspector. Death is confirmed, that is a formality. The lady is life extinct. Death appears to have been caused either by the severing of the throat or by the stab wounds to the heart, which I believe have penetrated the aorta. Both wounds would have been fatal in their own right, but the post mortem will confirm or otherwise that the aorta has been penetrated. The presence of blood in quantity from the throat wound indicates two things. The first is that the cutting of the carotid artery preceded the wound to the heart. The second is that the murder took place here."

"She wasn't murdered elsewhere and her body dumped here?"

"No, Inspector. She was murdered where she fell—or fell where she was murdered is probably a better way of putting it. Can you please give my apologies to the pathologist? I have to attend a sudden death in Castlemilk, though I would have preferred to stay and observe his work."

"Of course."

Dr. Chan giving a second neat bow of the head, he turned smartly and walked away. Donoghue looked about him. It was 8:45 in the forenoon of a cold, overcast Wednesday in the autumn of the year. The locus of the offense was a small area of waste ground over which a path had been worn which formed a shortcut between the main road and the tenements on a side street. Either side of the path was a rough, uneven surface of brick, tin cans, and coarse grass. It was surrounded by dark soot-stained Dennistoun tenements, the occupants of which stared down in horrified fascination at the tragedy which had been visited upon their neighborhood. A uniformed constable stood close to where the police vehicles were parked at the entrance to the waste ground. Two more constables stood close to the police tape. It began to rain. Some start to a working day; some end to a life.

A silver Volvo estate car drew to a halt behind the police vehicles. The driver was a tall, silver-haired man who left the car and walked toward Donoghue. He carried a black bag.

"Good morning, Inspector," he said as he drew close to Donoghue.

"Good morning, Doctor Reynolds." Donoghue fell in step with the pathologist as he walked toward the police tape and the mound covered by a blanket. "Dr. Chan has attended and confirms death. He sends his regards and would have stayed but he had to attend a sudden death."

Reynolds grunted. "Thank you." He lowered himself under the

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tape and for a second time since it was laid in place the blanket was peeled back.

"I see what he means." Reynolds stood as the blanket was once again replaced. "I can't do anything here," he said. "I'll have the body removed forthwith."

"I'd like the knife as soon as possible, sir."

"Of course. I'll have to measure it to confirm that it was the weapon used to inflict the injuries. I'll do that first thing and send it to you by courier. You'll have it by midmorning."

"Do you need the handbag at all, sir?"

"I don't think so." Reynolds knelt, lifted the blanket, and removed the handbag. He held it carefully, touching it minimally as he opened it. He examined the contents, then closed the bag and examined the outside. "Nothing of interest to me here." He handed the bag to Donoghue. "Just a lady's handbag. No pills, no blood which may or may not be hers, no other possible weapon, so it's all yours."

Holding the bag as delicately as Dr. Reynolds had, Donoghue opened it. It contained an address in Dennistoun just two streets from where the corpse lay and where it was spotted—stumbled on, in fact, by a workman heading home after his night shift. Donoghue took a note of the address and took the bag to the nearest police vehicle. He handed it to the driver. "For the attention of the forensic chemist," he said, "a.s.a.p." The driver took a large, self-sealing cellophane sachet and placed the bag inside. He closed the sachet, placed it on the seat beside him, and drove away toward the city center, toward Charing Cross and P Division police station.

And a lifeless flat it was, too—in a three-apartment, one up in a quiet cul-de-sac. Outside, it was just like any other flat, a darkly stained door, a heavy brass knocker under the name McLaren embossed in gold on a fancy tartan background. The close was clean, swept of litter and smelling with eye-watering intensity of disinfectant.

Inside the flat was dull. Dull, hard, and functional. It was neat, it was clean, and it was, in consequence, to Donoghue's mind, utterly lifeless. It was the home of a person, in this case a woman, who led a directionless and meaningless existence. It was all there, the carpets, the chairs, the television, the kitchen—this last particularly neat and tidy, and the fridge, of course, had been recently defrosted. But that was it and it was all of it. Donoghue could detect no sense of warmth, no sense of an existence having been maintained in these

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walls, a sense which might have been offered by the presence of a plant or two. The mood of the home was flat and cold and Donoghue felt that it lacked a sense of the appreciation that life had riches and wealth to offer, a sense that would have been given by a shelf or two of books, say. And it lacked a sense of humor. It lacked a sense of being part of life, a feeling that might have been projected by important dates or a valued rendezvous being circled round the appropriate dates on the calendar. There was no decoration, but on the mantelpiece was a glossy black, garish souvenir from Blackpool which, to Donoghue's mind, served no other purpose than to clash with the yellow wallpaper.

"She lived alone," said the woman who had let Donoghue and the uniformed constable into the flat. "Always locking herself out, she was—that's why I keep the spare key. She had a dog, but it died. She didn't get another," said the woman, as though it was an item of luggage that had not been replaced. "She never married, didn't Sadie. No family to speak of."

"What does that mean?" Donoghue asked coldly. The woman annoyed him, nodding her head as she spoke and as she moved her head surveying Sadie McLaren's flat, even though she had a spare key.

"I think she has a cousin or two, who she never saw. She grew up an only child, buried both her parents, never wed. No children."

"I see."

"So the cousins you mention, they would be the next of kin?"

"Aye. Why next of kin?" The woman paled.

"I think you'd better sit down," said Donoghue and the woman collapsed into a chair and clutched her apron. "Oh—" she said.

"We have reason to believe that Miss McLaren may have been murdered."

"Oh!" said the woman again.

"Certainly a lady who was carrying the handbag in which Miss McLaren's name and address were found was murdered. We have yet to positively identify the body. For that we normally need a next of kin."

"Oh," the woman whimpered. She was middle-aged, with short, curly hair and a heavily freckled face. She had thick, puffy ankles which spoke of a heart condition. "She once told me that they lived in England. I don't know the address. She must have an address book somewhere," said the woman, beginning another sweep of the flat.

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"We can't search without a warrant, and to do that we must first determine the deceased lady's identification. It may still be that Sadie McLaren will come through the door at any time."

"I don't think so," said the woman. "You know, I thought there was something the matter when I saw her milk hadn't been taken in this morning. And later when I went to the wee dairy across the road to get some bacon for my man's breakfast, I saw the curtains were shut—Sadie's curtains! Well, I knew something was wrong. She doesn't sleep late, she's always up with the birds. It's one thing about her that's worth remarking on, but I don't want to speak ill of the dead. I mean, if—"

"It's all right," said Donoghue. "You'll be helping us."

"Well, she was meticulous. Pure meticulous about time-keeping. Came from her job, I expect. She's a train announcer—don't know her exact title, but, you know, she's one of the people who say over the loudspeaker system, 'The train now standing at platform ten is the such-and-such time for so-and-so destination, calling at this place and that place, passengers wishing to go to that place change at this place.'

"That was her job. She had a lovely speaking voice. Soft but not posh, superb enunciation, natural. Never took lessons at all. You know, she told me once she started out serving at the staff canteen—there for years. Story goes that one Christmas at the party they got her to announce the prizes for the raffle over a microphone. The next day, the station manager called her to his office and said he had just the job for her. That was twenty years ago and she's had the job since. I remember on holiday—I've two children, grown now—I remember going away for the Fair and at the station the children heard the announcement of the train and they'd say, 'That's Auntie Sadie, isn't it?' "

"I'd like to ask you to accompany us to the mortuary," said Donoghue, interrupting what was beginning to sound like an endless flow.

"Oh."

"We'd like you to view the body. Just the face. You won't see any injuries. In the circumstances, I think that you're the only person who could tell us whether or not the lady is in fact Sadie McLaren."

"I'll get my coat," said the woman.

In the event, the identification was positive. The steel drawer was

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pulled from the bank of steel drawers, the cloth parted, and the woman said, "Oh, Sadie, hen, what's become of you?"

Elliot Bothwell took a slow lunch in the canteen. Like all civilian employees of the police, he was tolerated by the uniformed officers but not fully accepted. He sat alone at a corner table and ate the packed lunch that had been made up for him by his mother, with whom, at the age of thirty-six, he still lived in the same three-apartment flat in Queens Park in which he had grown up.

Bothwell had begun his working life as a chemistry assistant in a secondary school, mixing the same calm chemicals for class after class of adolescents, who seemed to him to be more interested in the mass destruction of expensive equipment and contributing to the greying of the hair of the chemistry master than they were in learning the rudiments of experiment-observation-result. He saw the post of Forensic Assistant with the Strathclyde Police advertised in the internal vacancy bulletin and applied for it out of desperation. He got the job and thought that the desperation had been on the part of the police; he was told later that he had been the only applicant. He was overweight and nervous, his movements were clumsy and uncoordinated, and he blinked at the world through thick-lensed spectacles.

On this day he ate his lunch, tossed the wrapping tissue into the waste bin, and closed the lid of his lunchbox. He poured coffee from a flask into a mug and sipped it. At 13:30, he left the canteen and returned to the small laboratory where he worked. He had been asked to examine a knife for latents.

The knife, as was most often the case, was an ordinary five-inch kitchen knife. It was Scotland's number-one murder weapon. It is a weapon that is easily concealed in jeans, easy to take into the town where it gets pulled during a rammy and the rammy becomes a murder incident. It is also a legitimate kitchen tool which comes easily to hand during a marital dispute—which so very often happens, by awful convenience, in the kitchen in the house. Elliot Bothwell had been a forensic assistant with the police for ten years and in that time he had seen many, many kitchen knives covered with black, congealed blood, as was this knife, from which latents were lifted and processed and very often matched with those of well known petty criminals. After a ten-year stretch in the slammer, they became pros and wore gloves when handling knives.

Bothwell took hold of the instrument, holding it carefully between

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his thumb and forefinger at the hilt. Fingerprints on the handle were evident to the naked eye. The individual whorls and spurs which could identify the owner of the print would only be visible under a microscope or latterly by computer enhancement. Bothwell laid the knife down on the working surface of the bench, sprinkled fine powder on the handle, and then dusted the handle, leaving behind thereby the powder which had adhered to the fingerprint.

He laid clear adhesive tape and then peeled the tape away and so "lifted" the print, which he then mounted on a sheet of cardboard. He repeated the operation on the reverse side of the handle and lifted two more prints. He sent the results to the collator. The operation took a little over one hour. He logged the operation in his records and then addressed himself to the next item: latents to be lifted from the steering wheel taken from a crashed stolen vehicle.

"I don't suppose that you might know of anybody who would want to harm Miss McLaren?" Donoghue turned his car into the side street in Dennistoun where Miss McLaren's neighbor lived and where Sadie McLaren had lived.

"No—no one," said the lady who had identified the corpse. "Not even the burglar."

A pause. A silence between them.

"Tell me about the burglar," said Donoghue softly, invitingly.

"Saw him last week, so I did. Bold as brass, he was, up a ladder in the back close, peering into Sadie's bedroom. I yelled at him and he scampered down the ladder and ran off over the waste ground, leaping away over the stones like a mountain goat in a black coat."

"Could you describe him?"

"Small. Lithe, the way he moved—really supple. Dark-haired, distinctive scar on his face. He had one of those radios—you know, the ones you clip to your waist and has little earplugs. Joggers wear them."

"Walkmans?"

"If that's their name. The wearer has the music, everybody around him just has the hiss to listen to. Really annoying, so it is."

"Could you recognize him again?"

"Och, aye, son. He ran, but he didn't try to conceal his identity. He had strange eyes. He looked like a frightened animal. He wore black—jacket, shirt and trousers, training shoes. Little boy black."

"Age?"

"Older than I thought when I first saw him up the ladder. When

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I first saw him, I thought, Well, there's a wee ned turning folks' windows when he should be at school. So I yelled and he slid down the ladder and stood looking at me like he wasn't bothered about being seen. That's when I saw his eyes and the scar."

"Age?" said Donoghue impatiently.

"Och, aye, aye. Late thirties. Aye, late thirties."

"Seen him before or since?" Donoghue pulled to a stop outside the woman's tenement.

"Well—possibly." She pondered her reply. "I didn't think much of it at the time, but about a week ago I was looking out of my window and I saw Sadie coming up the road from her work. Like I said, you could set your clock by her. And then I saw this wee guy following her—well, walking about twenty feet behind her. It was getting dark. The streetlights had just been switched on, so that made it a bit confusing, throwing shadows everywhere. But when I saw that wee guy up a ladder at Sadie's window, I thought, I've seen you before. I couldn't think where at first, and then I remembered that little figure following Sadie up the street that evening."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"Certainly." The woman opened the car door and swiveled out. "Certainly," she said, without a backward glance.

"The prints belong to a fellow called Black," said the Collator.

"Appropriate enough name." Donoghue pressed the phone between his ear and shoulder, holding his notepad as he scribbled on it.

"Andrew Black." The Collator's voice continued in his ear. "Age? Well, I've got his numbers here—a quick bit of mental arithmetic would put his age at thirty-seven years. Thirty-eight next month."

"Would any distinguishing features he might have include a scar, by any chance?"

"By some chance, yes," said the Collator. "Do you know him?"

"No, but a member of the public provided a good description earlier on this afternoon. I think he's our man. Any address?"

"Woodilee Hospital."

"Oh?"

"His crimes are petty by nature and always have been. Theft, breach of the peace, that sort of thing. His main problem, according to the monitor in front of which I humbly sit, is that he has psychiatric health problems. I'll send the file up to you, but I don't think it will contain the sort of information you require. The last address

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is a year old and that's the last one of a series of 'care of' addresses that I recognize as lodging houses. I would suggest that you start with Woodilee Hospital. He was sent there by the District Court. He accepted voluntary in-patient treatment in lieu of a custodial sentence. That was for lewd and libidinous practices."

"I see." Donoghue shifted the phone to his other ear.

"Going by this form, I'd say that Andrew is what is known in the trade as a 'social inadequate.' "

"Certainly sounds like it," Donoghue mumbled in agreement. "Woodilee Hospital, you say?"

"Ward 125A."

"It tends to annoy us," said the doctor, white-coated, very young to Donoghue's eyes to be a psychiatrist, but psychiatrists are like police officers—when they start looking young—!

"In what way, sir?" Donoghue sat in the anteroom with his hat on his knees. Beyond him, through a pane of glass, he could see lost-looking people in dressing gowns shuffling in the ward. In the other direction, outside, a passenger train thundered through open fields toward Edinburgh. Or was it thundering from Edinburgh? Donoghue was disoriented, having walked along a succession of corridors to reach Ward 125A.

"It annoys us because we often feel that the court is making a medical diagnosis. They accept that they have to do something with people like the Andrew Blacks of this world, but they accept that he is not really a criminal, even though he may have offended against statute, so they don't send him to prison. But they obviously have to do something, so they send him to us. We can't refuse to take them, because they come by order of the court. Treatment is open-ended, so we can discharge them after a few days—and we do because there's such a pressure on beds."

"A mess."

"A pure mess," agreed the psychiatrist. "The prison population is made up of the sad, the mad, and the bad, and the smallest of those groups is the bad. We share the sad and the mad with them. We don't at all mind working with the mad—that's our job—but the sad I'm afraid we can do little with. For them, prisons and psychiatric hospitals are just a succession of revolving doors. They're not bad enough to do long stretches in the nick and they're not mad enough to be kept in hospital, but they can't survive in the community so they pretend to be suicidal. For example, they walk into the Kelvin

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and stand there, waist deep, until somebody notices them and calls the police. Or they smash a shop window so they'll get taken inside one institution or another. Inside, they don't have to think. Outside they do."

"So. Andrew Black."

"Andrew." The psychiatrist sat on the couch adjacent to Donoghue. "Andrew is one of our best customers. It was in fact him I was thinking of. The last time he came in here, he had walked into the river and stood waist deep for two hours. It took that length of time before someone spotted him and called the police. The police charged him with breach of the peace just to get him into the system and in the cells overnight so he'd get dried out and fed. The court sent him to us, but it wasn't a suicide attempt, he was just attention-seeking. We couldn't keep him."

"I see."

"He's happier here than in the slammer because he gets beaten up in prison. Here he gets three meals a day laid down in front of him, and when he's not eating he sits in a comfortable chair all day watching television. But, like I said, he wasn't ill, so he was discharged a few days later. There are plenty of genuinely suicidal people who need the bed he occupied, so we filled him full of protein and gave him a short course of anti-depressant drug therapy, did psychiatric and psychological tests just to ensure that there was no real illness on that occasion, and—"

"Showed him the door," Donoghue said. "And supposing he or people like him do actually commit suicide?"

"It's a real possibility," the psychiatrist conceded. "But that doesn't mean to say that they are ill. When such people pretend to commit suicide as an attention-seeking gesture, it's a game that could go tragically wrong. Andrew was in the river for two hours. He wouldn't have lasted much longer. He was lucky to have been spotted when he was."

"Could such a person, an inadequate personality—could they kill another person?"

"Yes." The psychiatrist remained calm. "But only because anyone, including you and me, is capable of killing another. But Andrew Black isn't a homicidal maniac—we wouldn't discharge him if he was. But yes, he could kill."

"Under what circumstances could he kill?"

"Well, if he was badly frustrated." The door of the anteroom opened. A nurse entered and handed the psychiatrist a folder and

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then withdrew. "This is his file. See how thick it is. Sorry, your question. Well, he could kill if he was intensely frustrated, same as many people. He could kill himself—that is to say, he could make a real attempt on his life rather than a token attempt if he became suddenly confronted with his own reality. If at the age of thirty-eight or so, as he is now, if he received a sudden flash of insight that he'd never had before, if he saw himself as others see him and, for an instant, stopped feeling the self-pity and the misplaced sense of injustice which are the hallmarks of the socially inadequate, if he received a revelation about something which in turn gave him insight so that he got pulled up short, so that he said, 'My God, I'm throwing my life away! I can't see a way forward, and at the age of thirty-eight there's no time to start laying foundations!' Well, yes, then he might make a serious attempt on his life or he might go into a deep depression which would make him a legitimate in-patient here."

"When did you see him last?"

"A year ago, which in point of fact is a long time to go without seeing Andrew. Unless, of course, he's been in jail. But if he's stayed out of both jail and hospital for a year—"

"He has," said Donoghue. "His last offense was dated twelve months ago. It was following that that he was admitted here."

The psychiatrist raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised and I'm impressed. If he's survived in the community for a year, then he's done very well. Astoundingly well."

"Top of the stair," said the man. He was curious of the police presence, deferential in the manner that is the stamp of the ex-convict but utterly disinterested in the doings of his tenant, Andrew Black.

"Do you have a key?" Donoghue surveyed the stair. It wound up into the blackness, spiraling tightly. The man remained silent.

"We'll break the door down if you haven't."

"Do you have a warrant?"

Donoghue patted his jacket. One of the constables smiled.

"I'll get a key." The landlord turned and walked into the gloom. He returned a moment later with a mass of keys on a silver chain. "It's one of these," he muttered, leading the way up the stairs.

Andrew Black's garret was small, spartan, and narrow, crammed into the top corner of the old building under a steeply sloping roof

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and with walls of damp, peeling wallpaper. It had a chill which struck to the bones of the officers.

"What do you know about Mr. Black?" Donoghue turned to the squat landlord, whose forehead sloped just as the roof of the room he rented out.

"Not a lot. He comes, he goes, keeps himself to himself. Never speaks much. I could do with more like him. Pays his rent on time, keeps himself clean. Goes to the public baths twice a week. I don't know a great deal about him or his background, but he's keeping on top of his life by taking one day at a time. He's doing better than most who come and live here."

"Friends, family?"

"Just 'her.' "

"Her?"

"When he's doing something he doesn't want to do, like walk to the Social Security in the rain to see why his check didn't arrive, he'll say, 'I'm doing it for her.' He's doing *it*. 'It' might be cleaning up his room 'because she wants me to.' He just says things like that in passing—I don't know who she is. Like I said, he doesn't speak too much, does Andrew."

"Thank you," said Donoghue.

The man continued to stand in the room.

"The Inspector means that you can go now, sir," explained the most junior constable with a gentleness of authority that impressed Donoghue.

The police began to search the room. They opened drawers and wardrobe doors. The contents were neat and ordered. The room was basic, but it was as clean and tidy as it could possibly be made to be. If Andrew Black had been living like this, then he had indeed been doing well. Very well indeed. He had little obvious luxury, save for a neat pile of audio cassettes and a hi-fi on the small table by his bed. Donoghue picked up the tapes and examined them one by one, about twenty in all. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing at all. Nothing that Donoghue could put his finger on, but something, something—

They were unlabeled. He slipped one into the cassette player and pressed the Play button. As he did so, the junior constable with the air of gentle authority handed him a scrapbook. It was labeled on the front simply SHE.

Inside the book, Andrew Black had fixed photographs of glamorous

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women in glamorous poses and settings, all taken, Donoghue noted, from women's magazines which touched on the sensuous, the erotic, and the stylish, but had nothing of the cheap debasement of the female form that is the hallmark of many of the men's magazines. As he turned the pages of the scrapbook, the hi-fi began to play.

There was a loud echoing hollow sound as if in a huge vault and then a distant and distinct female voice: "The train standing at Platform One is the ten A.M. to London, calling at Motherwell, Carlisle, Lancaster, Preston, Wigan, Crewe, Milton Keynes, and London Euston, arriving at London Euston at five P.M. Buffet facilities are available on this train. The train arriving at Platform Thirteen is the nine-thirty from Ayr—"

Donoghue groaned at the emptiness and the fantasy of Andrew Black's life as he pressed the Fast Forward. But, he reflected, Sadie McLaren had had a wonderful speaking voice—men had fallen in love for less. "British Rail regrets to announce the cancellation of the fifteen-thirty to Dumfries. This is due to technical difficulties—"

Donoghue began to select tapes at random. "The fourteen-oh-five from Peebles is approximately forty-five minutes late. We regret any inconvenience this may cause."

It seemed to Donoghue that Andrew Black had not just become infatuated with the voice of Sadie McLaren: he had come to worship her as a deity. "Passengers for Morecombe and Blackpool should change at Preston—"

And like many people who had found a religion, he had come to make order and control out of chaos. At thirty-seven years, he had at last come to be on top of his life. Taking it, as the landlord said, one day at a time.

"Find something to put the tapes and the scrapbook in," snapped Donoghue irritably. Andrew Black had found something that gave him what all the porridge in the slammer and all the drug therapy in hospitals couldn't give him. And curiously had overcome him. He had found out the identity of the voice he had come to worship, clambered up a ladder, and seen the plainness and ordinariness of the actuality of Sadie McLaren's life.

"It doesn't usually take us so long to identify somebody—not in these circumstances," said the soft-voiced officer from the Home Counties. "Three days is embarrassingly long."

"No matter." Donoghue shifted the phone from one ear to the

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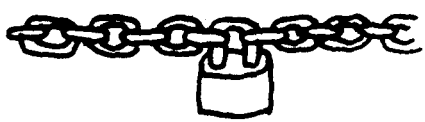
other. "We knew who we wanted to speak to and we knew it was only a matter of time before he surfaced in one way or another."

"Andrew Black," mused the Englishman. "A petty criminal, going by this printout. Not the sort of person to panic about being apprehended for traveling without a ticket, even if he was running from the law."

"There was a lot going on inside his head."

"I daresay there would be if he had murdered somebody earlier in the day, but petty criminals don't fight like cornered animals and then top themselves when escape is impossible."

"He was running from himself," said Donoghue. "It wasn't the guard he was running from, it was another demon that was following him down the train. That's why he did what he did when he came to the end of the last coach."



DETECTIVERSE

UNDERCOVER COP

by JOHN LARGE

He dresses in the plainest clothes,
For which he paid five dollars.
Although such garb he truly loathes,
He brags about his collars.

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a *NEW* short story by

PHYLLIS DILLER

Ever since her marriage to Fang and his reluctance to grant her a divorce, the author of this piece has had a morbid interest in perfect crimes. This blueprint is only one of many . . .

ONLY MINUTES AWAY

by PHYLLIS DILLER

Albert Dogan listened to his wife slurp down the better part of the drink the stewardess had brought her. His eyes closed, ostensibly to help him nap but actually to screen out any sight of the obese creature sitting next to him, he allowed himself the luxury of enjoying her dying. Her death was only minutes away.

A condemned woman need not get a last meal of her choice, he thought. She should be, however, entitled to down her last drink with gusto, noisy relish, and the annoying porcine sounds that had bothered Albert over the twenty-one years of their marriage. The months of their engagement, also slovenly enough to make a man cringe, didn't count.

It was a short engagement. It would have been shorter if Emma had come into her money sooner. Why was it that available widows were always heavy, unattractive, uncouth, with at least one hair growing from a badly placed liver spot? And had about them a slight odor of peat bog? Unfortunately, God, in working so hard on the heavens and the earth, had not spent any time providing for handsome, refined men in their early forties. Such problems He left for the men themselves. There are indications, in fact, that He became bored with the entire human project at an early stage and left His poor creatures to their own resources.

Emma, as the solution to Albert's problems, had worked out well

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for years. Of late, however, her negative qualities had been magnified beyond the point of recall. In a restaurant, nowadays, her chewing could be heard across the room, no matter how spacious. And after the meal, her front becrumbed, Albert was forced, in the absence of a vacuum cleaner, to brush her off briskly.

Albert opened his eyes and shuddered as he saw the drool of soft drink working its way down Emma's several chins. Dutiful husband that he was, he wiped the trail dry with the small cocktail napkin that came with the small tray. He owed Emma that much. He even felt kindly toward her. The poison he'd shaken into the soft drink at 11:02 A.M. this third of April was working its way into Emma's system.

At 11:09, Emma's breathing became softer. One minute later, the pilot announced on the intercom that the plane would soon pass over the International Date Line: it was an event to celebrate.

Pushing her drink cart down the aisle, the blonde stewardess with billowing hair and an aquiline nose asked if the Dogans cared for a drink. Albert said, "I'd like some coffee. Black."

"What about your wife?" the stewardess asked.

"She's dying."

Puzzled, the stewardess looked down and studied Emma briefly. Emma's face was angelic. The absence of the wheezing, possibly noticed earlier by everyone on the flight, suggested an affirmation of Albert's statement.

The stewardess tried to move Emma's fat arm from where it hung over the armrest. As best she could, she felt about for a pulse. She could feel Emma's warmth but no flow of blood through the blood vessels and she began a more formal search as was suggested by the airline manual.

Emma Dogan, the passenger in 7B, she concluded excitedly at 11:20, had expired.

The four stewardesses, the co-pilot, and the steward who'd rushed over from First Class took turns in administering CPR to the stricken woman. Albert watched them, the faint smile on his face contrasting vividly with the expressions of anxiety and horror on the faces of the passengers abutting the area of the aisle in which Emma had been placed. From beyond this cluster could be heard only sympathetic whispers.

Emma was pronounced dead at 12:10. Because the plane had

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crossed the International Date Line, her demise was duly entered in the plane's log for April second.

When questioned during the formal investigation that followed, Albert pled total innocence. Admitting the purchase of the powerful poison, he insisted that he couldn't have poisoned his wife a day after her death.

Rather than challenge the riddle, the government's attorney pigeonholed the case. It is now gathering dust and cobwebs in the archives room.

Albert Dogan has remarried. His rich new wife is even more burdensome and aggravating than Emma. Her name is Gloria. She hates to travel.

Albert has some ideas about how to deal with his wedlocked, landlocked state, but he might as well be in prison for all he dare act on them.

DETECTIVERSE

WHY HE DIED

by WILLIAM MACKIN, JR.

Old skirt chaser, Herbert Hyde,
To his fed-up wife once again lied.
"I'm going out with the boys"
Was the most used of his ploys.
Now he only goes out with the tide.

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a distinguished reprint by

A. M. HOMES

"My name's not Johnny."

"Johnny's not a name," the guy said. "It's like 'hey you,' only nicer."

He bounced the ball a couple of times and then held it. "You ready to go? Your mother said I should pick you up. She had somewhere to go."

A story from The Safety of Objects *by A. M. Homes, published by Norton, a short-story collection about which Ruth Rendell said: "These stories are remarkable. They are awesomely well written. In the sense of arousing fear and wonder in the reader they entertain, but what they principally bring us is a sense of recognition. Here are all the things that even today, even in our frank outspoken times, we don't talk about. We think of them punishingly in sleepless nights . . ."*

LOOKING FOR JOHNNY

by A. M. HOMES

I disappeared a few years ago; I disappeared and then I came back. It wasn't a big secret. It wasn't one of those beam-me-up-Scotty deals where I was here and then all of the sudden I was there. I didn't get to go to another planet or anything. I was gone for a few days and then I came home and the police wanted to know everything. They wanted to know about the car, who was in the car, where I went, what happened. They said I could draw pictures, show them with dolls, but I didn't know what to say. I disappeared when I was a child. I disappeared when I was nine.

I came home from school, had cookies and Kool-Aid, and went into

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the living room to watch TV. My retarded sister Rayanne was in there and she kept imitating the people on TV. She was older than me and really was retarded. She kept talking to the television and didn't stop when I told her to. Finally, I couldn't stand it any more so I left. I said, "'Bye, Mom, be back in a while," and I picked up my basketball and went to the playground. There were other kids there and almost everyone had their own ball. There were about ten balls going and sometimes they would hit each other in mid-air and go off in completely the wrong direction. Sometimes I'd trip over another guy going in for a shot and he might kick me in the butt and say "Asshole," or something.

It got late and it got dark and the other kids left one by one or sometimes in twos and threes. I was alone on the court shooting baskets, and I couldn't miss. The ball kept dropping through the net and I felt like I had magic in me. I was making all my shots, counting them to myself. When I got to fifteen in a row, I heard someone clap. I stopped playing and noticed a guy standing at the far edge of the court.

"That's fifteen straight up," he said. I shrugged. I shot again and the ball sailed through the hoop.

"Nice going, Johnny."

I caught the ball coming through the hoop and put up a hook shot. It went wide. The guy ran in, caught the ball, and held it pressed into his hip, like a teacher confiscating it.

"My name's not Johnny."

"Johnny's not a name. It's like 'hey you,' only nicer."

He bounced the ball a couple of times and then held it. "You ready to go? Your mother said I should pick you up. She had somewhere to go."

I remember being mad at my mother because she was like that. She was the kind of person who would take Rayanne somewhere and send someone I didn't know to pick me up. She knew lots of people I didn't know, mostly on account of Rayanne. She knew all the people who had retarded kids and I never wanted to meet them.

"I was looking for you, Johnny," the guy said.

I shrugged. "My name's Erol. Okay? Erol," I said.

He kept my basketball and walked toward his car. It was an old white station wagon, a Rambler with a red interior.

"Did she have to take my sister somewhere?"

"It's okay, Johnny. We'll stop at McDonald's."

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He talked like he didn't hear anything I said. He talked like it was something he had to practice in order to get it right.

"Are you hungry?"

I'm not retarded. If something had been really strange, like if the guy had a wooden leg, I would have noticed. I would have gotten up from the table and walked away. I would have walked when he got up and said he was going to call my mom. He said he was calling to ask if she wanted us to bring home food for them. He left me at the table with burgers and fries and I thought more about how many of his fries I could steal than whether or not I was ever going home again. I had no reason to leave; I was at McDonald's with two burgers, large fries, and a shake. I didn't know what crazy was. I didn't know that sometimes you can't tell the difference between a real crazy and a regular person and that's what makes them crazy in the first place.

The guy came back, said my mother wasn't home, and that he was going to take me to his house until she got back. "Hey, hey, Johnny," the guy said. In the car I played with my basketball. I turned it around and around on my lap.

"I have to pick up something. Is that okay, Johnny? Do you want anything?" I shook my head. "Is there anything you want?"

"No," I said.

I waited while he went into the drugstore. It was one of those times when the sun goes down but it isn't dark yet. There was a weird blue light pressing down on everything, outlining it. I stood next to the station wagon and bounced the basketball.

"Hello, Erol," Mrs. Perkins said. She was pushing a grocery cart across the parking lot even though you weren't supposed to. She was pushing the cart and it sounded louder than a train. The wheels kept going all over the place. Her two kids were there, squished into the little seat up front that barely holds one.

"Hi," I said as she passed me.

"Are you with your mother?" she asked. Mrs. Perkins lived three doors down and thought that everything that had anything to do with anyone on our street was her own personal business.

"I'm waiting for a friend of hers."

Mrs. Perkins shook her head and started pushing the cart again. My mother always said that Mrs. P. didn't like us because there wasn't a man in our house. She didn't think that it was right and my mother agreed with her. My mother thought there should be a man in the house, but after my father left she couldn't find one. I

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think it was because of Rayanne. No good guy would want to live in a house with a retarded kid.

"Who was that?" the guy asked when he got back into the car. "Don't you know not to talk to strangers?" He slammed the door.

"It was Mrs. Perkins. She lives on my street. She has two little kids. She's not a stranger." The guy didn't answer and we drove away real fast.

"I've got a little something for you, Johnny," he said. He pulled a bottle out of a paper bag. "Preventive medicine. You look like you might be coming down with something."

"I feel okay," I said.

"We don't have a spoon, so you'll just have to take it from the bottle cap."

"I'm not sick."

"Look," the guy said. He took his eyes off the road to look at me and the car swerved into the other lane, the wrong-direction lane. "If I tell you to take your medicine, you take it. I'm not used to children talking back to me. Your parents might stand for it, but I won't. Got it?"

I wanted to tell him that I didn't have parents, that my dad didn't even live with us, and didn't he know that, but I couldn't. It seemed like he was already annoyed with me. I figured it was because my mother wasn't home, he couldn't just drop me off, and now he was stuck taking me everywhere with him.

He put the bottle between his legs and twisted the top until it opened. "Four capfuls," he said, handing the bottle to me. Even though I felt fine, I did it. It was hard as hell to pour it in the car and I was scared I'd spill, but I did it. I swallowed the stuff. Cough medicine, grape only worse. It tasted like the smell of the stuff my mother used to polish the furniture. "Good," the guy said. He pulled a Kit-Kat bar out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me. "To clear the taste."

We were quiet and he kept driving. It was dark. I watched the cars coming toward us, two white eyes, staring me down.

"Is my mom home yet?" I asked. I was getting tired.

"I called her from the drugstore and she said not to bring you home tonight. I think she wanted to be alone."

"What about Rayanne?"

"Alone with Rayanne. She needed you out of her hair for a while, no big deal."

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I shrugged and thought about how much I hated retards, and how they stole the whole show for nothing.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"We'll be there in a while."

"I'm tired," I said. "And I'm supposed to color maps for Geography."

"Don't worry, Johnny."

"What's your name?"

"Randy," he said.

And then I don't know what happened. I had my head out the window and felt sick from burgers, fries, shakes, and candy. I was throwing up out the car window while Randy was driving and he didn't even pull over. He didn't put his hand on my forehead like my mother did. He just kept driving and calling me Johnny.

"Wake up, Johnny," Randy said, shaking my shoulder.

It took me a few minutes to get my eyes to stay open, to remember where I was. "Here you go," he said, pushing a spoon of the same grape medicine into my mouth.

"It makes me sick," I said, after I'd swallowed the stuff. I told myself that I'd never swallow it again. I told myself to hold it in my mouth, in my cheek like a hamster, but not to swallow.

"I said you were sick. You didn't listen, did you?" He brought me a glass of water. "Do you want some tea, some toast, some ginger ale?"

I shrugged and felt dizzy.

"You have to eat," he said and then left the room.

I lay in the bed and felt like I would pass out just lying there. I realized that I was almost naked. I wasn't wearing any clothes—except my underwear—and I thought about how my mother told us, especially Rayanne, to be careful of people who might want to mess with you. She said that anyone could be a person who would do a thing like that. She said it might even be someone I knew. She told me this a million times, but never said anything about what if someone took off your clothes while you were asleep. She never mentioned that and still I knew I didn't like it. I sat up and saw my clothes all folded up at the end of the bed. I saw them and thought everything was okay because someone who folds your clothes up and puts them on the end of the bed doesn't seem like the kind of person who would mess with a kid. I reached down, grabbed my clothes, and put them on under the covers.

"Hey, Johnny," Randy said when he came back into the room. He

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was carrying a tray made out of cardboard. On the tray was a plate of eggs and toast and a glass of juice.

"I'm sick, I can't eat."

"Oh, but you have to eat, you're a growing boy."

"I want to go home."

"Your mother won't want you back if you're sick."

"She'll take care of me."

"Don't be a baby, Johnny."

"Today's my day to collect lunch money," I said.

"You said you were sick. Do you go to school when you're sick? Don't play games with me. Eat your breakfast."

I shook my head.

"What did I tell you to do?" he yelled. The veins in his neck popped out and he went white like sugar. "You do what I tell you and never say no to me, hear? Never say no to me!"

I looked at Randy and thought about how some people were jerks. I thought about how I couldn't wait to be grown up, to have my own private TV, to be alone always. "Now, what did I tell you?"

"Eat the breakfast," I said.

"So do it."

"I'm allergic to eggs." I took small bites of the toast.

"Are you really allergic?" he asked. "Do you want cereal? There are some Rice Krispies in the kitchen. Do you want Krispies?"

"No." I paused. "I want to call my mother and tell her I'm sick. She'll come get me."

"I don't have a phone, Johnny. There isn't a phone."

Randy stood there watching me. He watched everything I did like I was something under a microscope. "Do you like to read?" I shrugged. He pulled a stack of old magazines out from under the bed. "I saved these for you. I have to do some work outside. Is there anything you need?"

"Where's the TV?"

"Don't say television to me. It'll kill you. It makes you so you can't think. Can you think, Johnny?"

I shrugged and he walked out. Randy's magazines were the slippery kind that parents read. They were the kind that Rayanne would spread out all over the floor of the dentist's office and then go skiing on until my mother stopped her. I got out of bed and walked down the hall.

The first room was Randy's. It was small and filled with light. There were two windows and a breeze was leaking in from some-

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where. The air seemed to spin around, picking up dirt from the floor, making it dance and glow like gold. There was a mattress with green-striped sheets, and rows of empty soda bottles, alternating Yahoo, RC, and Mountain Dew, were lined up around the edges of the room, across the windowsill, everywhere. I was in the room, looking, and Randy's hands sank down on my shoulders as if they were taking a bite out of me. He gripped me by the muscle across the top of my back, across my shoulders.

"I was just looking," I said.

"Whose room is this?" he said.

I shrugged.

"Whose?" he asked.

"Yours."

"Did I say you could look? Did I say you could come in here? Did you ask? No!" he yelled into my face. "Some things belong to a person himself. They're private and you can't take them away."

I could smell his breath. It was hot like a dog's. I tried to turn my head away, but he held it straight. He held it with his thumb pressed under my chin.

"You can't have everything. I don't go into your room, looking at your things, do I?"

I wanted to tell him that my room was at home and the room down the hall didn't have anything in it except a bed with blue-flowered sheets and a Pepto Bismol-colored blanket. I wanted to tell him that he was starting to remind me of Rayanne because she always asked me to tell her things and then would explain them back to me all wrong.

"You really are a case," he said and then walked out of the room. I followed him down the hall. "Are you a lost dog?" he asked.

"No," I said.

He put his hand on my shoulder and I thought he was going to push me away and say get lost or something. I thought he might crack my head against the wall.

"Are you feeling better, Johnny? Are you ready to go fishing? Do you have a fever?" He pressed his hand up to my forehead, held his palm there for a minute, and then flipped his hand over so that the back side was against my head. I felt his knuckles digging into the thin crevice in the middle of my forehead. "It's gone," he said, taking his hand away and walking farther down the hall.

When his hand was off my head I could still feel the knuckles in that small crack in my skull. I thought about how I'd always figured

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that gap was a sort of structural deformity. I didn't know it was normal. I thought it was something that could start moving, an earthquake of the mind. I thought the two halves might separate and split my head open. I thought the gap could close and force my brain out through my ears. It always seemed that if anything happened to that place, I'd end up the same as Rayanne. It was like a warning that something could go wrong and I'd be just like my sister. I rubbed my forehead, letting my fingers dip into that place. I rubbed and wished Randy hadn't touched me there.

"Hey, Johnny, is it time for medicine?"

"I'm fine," I said.

"It's good for you, come on." Randy held out the bottle. His fingers were wrapped around the label. He unscrewed the top and took a small swig, swished it around in his mouth, and swallowed. I shook my head. "I'm not about to force you. That's not what I'm about." He recapped the bottle and put it down on the ledge above the sink.

"My mother used to dose us sometimes. Sometimes at night, she'd want us asleep and we'd still be going full speed and she'd come into the bedroom, hold my nose until my mouth opened, and pour stuff down me; sometimes it was brandy, sometimes I didn't know what it was. She always did it to me and not to my brother because he had asthma real bad and she didn't want to mess him up." He paused. "Are you hungry?"

I shrugged. Randy opened the refrigerator. "A Fig Newton might work. I'm not a cookie person, but Fig Newtons aren't really cookies, they're more of a medical food, you know? There's milk in here, too. There you go, Johnny." He handed me the cartons.

"I still want to call my mom."

"No phone."

"She's probably wondering where I am."

"No, she's not, Johnny. She knows you're with me. I told you that yesterday."

"But aren't I supposed to go home soon? And why don't you have a phone? Everyone has a phone. It's probably illegal not to have one."

"Don't talk law and order to me. Everyone has a phone and a television, and every other one has a video recorder and a washing machine. And then they have microwave ovens. It doesn't mean they're smart. Start collecting things and you get in trouble. You start thinking that you care about the stuff and you forget that it's things, man-made things. It gets like it's a part of you and then it's

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gone and you feel like you're gone also. When you have stuff and then you don't it's like you've disappeared."

"You have empty bottles in rows all around your room," I said.

"Empties aren't stuff. What are you, stupid?"

"I'm not stupid."

"Keep it that way," Randy said, and then he walked away and I heard the slap of the screen door.

I walked from room to room eating Fig Newtons and drinking milk straight from the carton. I remember thinking it was great that no one was making me pour it into a glass. The rest of the house wasn't much, just a living room with a busted-up sofa and a green chair made out of the same stuff as car seats, the stuff your legs stick to on summer days. I sat down on the sofa and then had to move over to save myself from one of those springs that you can't see but all of the sudden pops through and stabs you in the butt.

I sat there eating cookies and sort of daydreaming. I thought that this was the kind of life I'd live if it was just me and my dad, no mother, no Rayanne. I thought about how everything in our house got all weird when my dad came to visit. My mother would run around putting everything into piles on top of the TV or the coffee table. Then she'd go to the grocery store and buy things like broccoli and veal chops. We'd have to put clean clothes on and sit with her in the living room until she heard his truck coming down the street, the gears shifting down.

My father would come into the house and we'd be standing there like we were in the Army and you could tell from his face that he wished he hadn't come. It was like he wanted to sneak in and have us find him sitting there watching TV like he'd never been gone. It was like he made himself think that he didn't matter, that his leaving didn't matter.

Sometimes he'd try and fake us out. He'd drop by without warning. Rayanne, my mom, and I might be out in the front yard and we'd hear the truck as soon as it turned the corner at the end of the street. Rayanne would look up and see him sitting twenty feet up in the cab and she'd take off, galloping toward the truck in her retarded way, legs getting tangled in each other, never sure which foot should go next.

The screen door slapped shut and somewhere in my head I heard it, but didn't really know where I was. I was still thinking about my father, his truck, and the view from up in the cab.

"Hey, hey, Johnny," Randy said. "Are you sleeping?"

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"Not exactly," I mumbled.

"What exactly?"

I shrugged.

"You don't have to spend all day in the house. When I saw you out there playing ball, I figured you were an outdoor type."

I shook my head.

"I like to watch TV. I watch TV and my sister comes in. I can't stand her, so sometimes I have to get out of the house. My sister is retarded, did you know that?"

Randy nodded.

"No matter how old she gets, she'll never be better than a seven-year-old. She calls my father Uncle John because she says that daddies live at home and uncles just come and visit."

"Yeah, well, get up. We're going fishing. What we catch is what we eat for dinner."

"I don't know how to fish."

"I'll teach you, Johnny."

I shrugged.

"Do you care about anything?"

I shrugged again.

"Don't shrug. Either talk or don't, but don't goddamn shrug at me. It's like saying go to hell, only worse. You're saying it's not even worth the energy it takes to say the words."

I walked through the woods behind Randy.

"The trick," he said, "is just like life. Don't let them know you want them. Play dumb and they'll act dumb."

He pushed the boat into the water and we waded in. My jeans got wet up to my thighs and felt like weights wrapped around my legs. Randy rowed out into the lake. He handed me a coffee can. "Take one out and put it right there on the end."

I looked into the can and saw about a thousand worms. "I can't," I said.

"You can and you will," Randy said, holding out the hook to me. He talked in the same tone my mother used with Rayanne when she wanted her to do something. "We can sit here until the moon is blue."

I turned my head away and put my hand into the can. The thin rolls of worm were soft and a little silky. They were stuck together, piled on top of one another. I had to look directly into the can in order to pick one up. I handed it to Randy.

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"On the hook," he said. "Put it on the hook." I jammed it down on the hook, ripping its body, squirting worm juice into the air.

Randy cast the fishing line out over the lake, explaining how it was all in the flick of the wrist. He handed me the pole and I looked out at the thin plastic line. I looked across the lake and saw a man on the other side. I got up on my knees, nearly dropped the fishing pole, and waved. I kept doing it until Randy slapped my hand down. But the man across the lake had seen me. He waved back and then Randy had to wave to get him to stop waving.

"People here like to be left alone," Randy said. "You shouldn't have bothered him."

I started crying, not out loud, but to myself. I was crying and thinking about how I wanted to go home, put on dry clothes, talk to my mom, and watch TV.

"What's with you, Johnny? It's a beautiful day, you're out fishing, you've never fished before, but you're doing it, and you're acting worse than an old hat."

There was a yank on my line and I sat up.

"Pull back slowly, just a little bit."

I did what he said.

"Don't let him think he's caught. If he thinks he can get away he'll try and wait you out. But if you let him know he's caught, he'll fight like hell."

We pulled him in and then the fish was there, hanging from the hook, staring at me. Randy dropped him onto the floor of the boat. The fish flopped around.

"Say hello to dinner," Randy said.

"I'm not eating."

"You'll eat."

I shook my head.

"Bait another hook."

I watched the fish until its gills stopped flapping, until I was sure it was dead. I watched for about ten minutes and jammed another worm onto the hook. Randy got a bite on his line and pulled in a small fish. He took it off the hook and threw it back into the water. "I'm not a murderer, Johnny," he said.

When we had three fish, Randy put away the poles and we ate sandwiches right there in the boat with the fish at our feet. "This is the life," Randy said.

I could feel the sun on the place on my shoulder where Randy had grabbed me when I was in his room. I could feel the sun through my

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shirt and it was like hands rubbing a sore place. I leaned back in the boat and used one of the floating cushions as a pillow.

"Hey, hey, Johnny, wake up." Randy had rowed us back to shore. "You sleep a lot for a kid your age."

"It's because of being sick."

"You were out all afternoon and you didn't seem sick. It's all in your head. You're sick in the head."

I got out of the boat and helped pull it back into the woods. "Last night you said I was sick. I threw up."

"I didn't know you like I do today." He paused. "Pregnant ladies throw up—are they sick? It's your head, Johnny."

Randy cooked the fish for dinner. We ate and then I helped him clean up.

"My father's coming to visit soon and I have to be there," I said. "It's the law. My mother lines us up by the piano and I have to be there."

"Johnny, she knows where you are. If she wanted you, she'd come get you."

The morning after that, Randy woke me up, told me to hurry, handed me a cream-cheese sandwich, and said I'd have to eat it in the car.

"Where are we going?"

"Did you ever split wood?" he asked.

"I've peeled the bark off branches."

"Ever hold an axe?"

"No."

Randy drove to a small shopping center and pulled in near the hardware store. There was a 7-Eleven right next to the hardware store with a pay phone in front. I followed Randy into the hardware store, but put my hand in my pocket and felt around for a quarter. While Randy was talking to the guy about axes and wedges, I pretended to get lost looking for some fishing stuff. I went outside to the pay phone, put the quarter in, and dialed. I dialed my mother and waited. I thought Randy was going to come outside and kill me. I thought he'd come out with an axe and take off my head. I didn't care.

The phone clicked a couple of times and then beeped busy. A couple of people came out of the 7-Eleven and I thought of asking them for help, but I wasn't sure what I'd say. I put the quarter in again and dialed. Busy. I hung up, got the quarter back, and put it

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in again. It started to ring, but then I thought I'd dialed the wrong number. I only had one quarter and I thought I might have hit an eight and not a five. I hung up, put the quarter in, and dialed again. Still busy. I thought of calling the operator or the police. I hung up, dialed again.

Randy came out of the store and saw me at the phone. He was carrying the axe in one hand and a package in the other. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Trying to call my mom."

"Any luck?"

"Line's busy."

He came over to the telephone and just stood there. He didn't get mad. He didn't kill me. He just stood there, listening to the phone beep. "Try again," he said.

I hung up, put the quarter back in, and dialed again. Busy. "Why is she on the phone?"

"Talking to someone," Randy said. He leaned against the wall of the 7-Eleven like he was going to stay there all day. He leaned back like he didn't care that I was calling home.

I felt like an idiot with him standing there, not trying to stop me. I felt mentally ill. Randy was telling the truth; my mother wasn't worried. She was sitting home, talking on the telephone.

"Let's go," I finally said.

"Go on, give it another try." I almost put the quarter in again, but then I wondered what I would say. What could I say with Randy right there, telling me to go ahead and call? I put the quarter into my pocket.

We went home and Randy showed me how to split logs; how to swing the axe with both arms straight, to swing up over my shoulder and then go straight down into the log. He explained about putting in the metal wedges so that with a few whacks the whole piece split open like an English muffin.

When we were done, Randy showed me how to cook; we made sandwiches and Rice Krispie squares. Then we went into the living room, ate, played poker, and passed a carton of milk back and forth between us. Sometimes when I drank, I'd tilt the carton a little too high and milk spilled out onto my face, ran back behind my ear and down my neck.

"A kid like you should have more to say," Randy said. "You should be nonstop, filled with ideas, things you're going to do, all that stuff."

I didn't look at him.

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"It's like you're not all there," he said.

I was looking at the dirt in the cracks on the floor. Randy said it was like I wasn't all there and I thought about Rayanne and wondered if she had lots of things trapped in her head. I thought about how she didn't really understand how retarded she was and how she thought I was a genius or something. I thought maybe I was like her, not enough for everyone to notice but enough for a guy like Randy to catch on. I thought it was probably my parents' fault for not telling me. Maybe that's why my father left. Maybe my mother, Rayanne, and me were all the same; maybe we were all retarded.

"Are you sleeping, Johnny?" Randy asked.

I shook my head.

"What's wrong with you?"

I shrugged and waited for him to hit me. The Krispie pan was on the coffee table with a couple of pieces left in it. The milk carton was right there, too. I reached my foot out and with the tip of my sneaker tipped the pan over. I knocked the pan over right in front of Randy.

He just sat there and looked at me. His face didn't change. "Feel better now?" he finally asked, sweeping the cards into a pile and then making them into a stack. I shrugged. He stood and I shriveled up. I didn't mean to, but he was standing over me and that's just what happened.

"Don't be scared of me, Johnny," he said. "Be scared of yourself." He picked up the milk carton and took it into the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator door open and close. I heard Randy pull out a chair and sit down. I got up off the sofa and onto my hands and knees. I picked up the pan, took it into the kitchen, and put it down on the counter.

"'Night, Johnny," Randy said. He was playing solitaire.

"'Night." I walked down the hall to my room.

The next morning Randy was gone. I sat on the living-room sofa and waited. I went outside and sat on the concrete front step. Across the dirt that was the front yard there were still pieces of wood that needed to be split and stacked. I picked up the axe. It felt heavier than I remembered. I raised it and went to work. About a half hour later Randy drove up.

"Where'd you go?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Put shoes on," he said. "Never work outside without shoes."

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I followed him into the house. "I'm sorry for what I did last night," I said. I'd been rehearsing it in my head all morning.

He nodded.

I went down the hall to get my shoes. Randy was in the kitchen making eggs for himself. "I said I was sorry."

"I hear you." He scraped the eggs out of the pan and onto a plate. I kept looking at him and he looked back at me. "Did you finish all the wood?" I shook my head. Randy started to eat and I went outside and kept splitting and stacking.

When the wood was chopped, I went into my room and fell asleep. The slap-slapping sound of a basketball woke me up. Randy was dribbling down the hall. He stood in the doorway bouncing the ball. "Get up, Johnny," he said. "We're going."

"Where?"

He shrugged and threw the ball at me, hard.

I caught it. It was my ball. I hadn't seen it since the night Randy picked me up. I held the ball for a minute and then put it down on the bed.

"Take it with you," he said.

I followed him out to the car. "Do you know how to drive?"

"I'm way too young."

"Never too young." He moved the car seat as far forward as it would go. If I sat so I could see, my legs were nowhere near the pedals. "You're too short," Randy said. I slid over so he could drive. He pulled the seat release and the whole front seat slid backward.

"Let's go fishing again," I said.

"I don't think so, Johnny," he said and I was quiet for a long time. The road turned into highway and I could feel him making the car go faster. It was afternoon. The sun was starting to go down.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He didn't say anything for a while. "You're not the kid I thought you'd be."

"What does that mean?"

He turned off the highway and we were someplace I'd been before. I turned the basketball around on my lap.

"I'm taking you back," he said. He made a few turns and I knew where he was.

"What's wrong with me?"

"You're not the right kid. You're not Johnny." Randy pulled up to the curb right at the bottom of the hill below the basketball courts. This was the exact same place he'd parked when he came up to the

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courts and called me Johnny. "Get out," he said. I sat there looking at the dashboard. "You've spent three days whining about calling your mother and going home. Now you're home. Go on, get out."

"Why?"

He leaned across me and opened the door on my side of the car.

"Out," he said, shoving my shoulder.

I got out.

Randy pulled away from the curb, turned the car around, and went back down the hill.

I walked home, cutting through the same backyards as always. I walked the same way but everything felt different. All the things I'd always liked, knowing who lived where and what their dog's name was, only made me feel worse. I went past clotheslines and instead of thinking it was funny to see Mrs. Perkins' flowered underwear hanging out, I wanted to rip it down. I wanted to take everything down and tear it into a million pieces. I crossed through the Simons' yard and into our backyard.

Rayanne was there by herself, playing in my sandbox. She was thirteen years old, bigger than my mother, and she was playing in the sandbox. I stood there until she saw me. She looked at me and tried to jump up. She wanted to get up but she did it too fast and didn't know what she was doing. She fell down and had to get up again. "Erol, Erol," she said, galloping across the backyard. "Erol," she said, but it came out sounding like "Error, Error." She came toward me and I dropped my basketball. I turned and ran back through the yards. I ran until I didn't know the names of the people in the houses around me. I ran through backyards until I stopped hearing Rayanne's voice calling Error.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

"Tell me this," Anne said. "Suppose the first wife were to die. Would the second marriage—the bigamous marriage — automatically acquire legal validity?"

If the lawyer's answer to this appeared somewhat ambiguous, his manner more cautious, Anne was satisfied that she knew all it was necessary to know. "As of now," she said, "my friend has only a suspicion that the marriage may not be legal. Or perhaps the other may not be. She can't be certain which marriage came first."

A colorful and compelling work of art(ifice) from Donald Olson, whose impressive short-story writing career is wall to wall with them . . .

THE BIGAMIST

by DONALD OLSON

Newton Tenney came down to breakfast to find his wife Jennifer in no happier mood than on the night before. Beyond the open French windows of what they called the morning room, dew lay heavily on the sun-washed lawn and a pair of goldfinches danced about the rim of the pebble-studded birdbath. Hardly a morning to sulk, and Newton felt again mildly aggrieved by Jennifer's reaction to his news. "Cheer up, darling. It's a lovely day," he said.

"I'm sure it's raining in London," she pouted.

"It doesn't *always* rain in London."

Her deep-violet, doll-baby eyes flashed resentment. "How can you look forward to living in London when you hate New York so much you can't wait to get back here for the weekends?"

He had explained before they were married that he'd never been

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able to face a two-hour trip twice a day between Manhattan and his country house, so it was agreed that for the time being he would continue his practice of remaining in the city four nights a week and spending the long weekends in the country. They had been married two years and it had begun to look like a permanent arrangement. But now suddenly he had announced they would be moving to England.

"It's not that I *want* to live in London," he'd insisted. "Establishing the London branch was my brainchild. As senior partner, I'm the only one who can get things organized over there." Newton was in Wall Street, the firm of Tenney and Morganti, though one might not easily have guessed his occupation. The dreamy eyes, choppy brown hair, and a certain delicacy of manner suggested a more romantic calling.

"You say it won't be forever," she'd protested, "so why must we give up the house?"

"We're not giving it up, we're leasing it. I don't want it standing empty out here in the wilds."

Now he gulped down his coffee and brushed her cheek with a parting kiss. "I must dash, bunnikins. Call you from the office."

She followed him out to the car. "Darling, I'm sorry to be such a killjoy. I just have to get used to the idea."

"That's my girl. A change will do us both good."

He took a cab from Grand Central, arriving at the East Side brownstone shortly after nine.

"You're late," said Anne, greeting him with a peck on the cheek.

"Train's fault. Bobby left for school?"

"Yes, and I must get my skates on, too." She worked for a publisher of children's books. "But there's something I want to talk to you about—I think."

"You think?"

"Something curious. We'll talk about it tonight. No time now." Anne, in heels, was slightly taller than Newton and with impeccable taste knew how to make the most of her unremarkable face and figure. She liked bright colors and wore eye-catching designer costume jewelry.

They shared a cab as far as Madison Avenue, where she left him. A good housewife, yet she had welcomed the chance to go back to work when Bobby reached adolescence. She loved her job and was well organized, but this morning she tore into her work with more

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than customary zeal, virtuously compensating in advance for the time she would have to take off in the afternoon. She wanted to solve her little mystery before mentioning it to Newton.

After lunch, she took a cab down to the Village, got out at Washington Square, and walked through milky sunshine the three blocks to the gallery she had passed on Saturday when her friend Sally had dragged her down to a boutique that sold "fabulous" costume jewelry.

The gallery was a nondescript hole-in-the-wall where the picture that had briefly caught her attention was still in the window. Whoever the artist was, he owed a lot of his style to Wyeth. Even the subject matter recalled Wyeth's *Christina's World,* only in this painting the woman was seated on a wicker bench, her face, turned away from the viewer, looking across a lawn to a fieldstone house with miniature turret and plum-colored shutters.

Feeling excitement, Anne studied the picture for only a few moments before opening the door and entering the gallery.

At dinner that evening—Bobby was already in bed—Newton reminded her of what she'd said that morning. "You were going to tell me something. You thought."

She dismissed the subject with a shrug. "I thought better of it."

"Anne, is something wrong? You've been awfully quiet."

"What could be wrong?"

Guessing wrongly what was on her mind, he sighed, put down his fork. "I'll miss this place. And you and Bobby."

"It won't be forever. You said so yourself."

"I wish you could come with me."

"That would hardly be practical. My job. Bobby's school."

"I'll be flying back once a month," he said, "maybe more often. And perhaps you could fly over for the holidays. I could make arrangements."

"That would be lovely."

"No, seriously. What were you going to tell me? I know when something's bothering you."

"It was nothing, really." She laughed. "Oh, all right. I happened to see a painting in a shabby little gallery in the Village. It reminded me of something. But I was mistaken. That's all."

A week passed. The weather turned rainy. Jennifer felt on edge. Rain made her think of London.

"You'd better get a move on," she said. "You'll miss your train."

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He put on his raincoat, pulled the belt tight around his slim waist, then laughed at her woeful expression. "Will you please cheer *up*. God above, darling, it's not the end of the world."

"It might as well be."

"I don't mean England. I mean us. The way we feel about each other. Geography can't affect that."

"If you say so."

He gave her another, longer kiss. "Everything's going to work out, I promise."

With a scarlet nail she traced the deep cleft in his chin, almost a duplicate of the one that furrowed his brow just above the nose, then she pushed him away with a resigned smile. "Go!"

He looked at his watch and moved to the door.

Jennifer stood at the window, watching him leave. Oh, God, she thought, why must I behave like such a selfish bitch?

The lawyer's office was only a few blocks from the publisher's on lower Madison. Anne took out a cigarette, then put it back as she caught the lawyer's glance of polite disapproval. Something about Eames, or the office, or her own uncertainty intimidated Anne.

"Now then, Mrs.—Smith." The barely perceptible doubt annoyed Anne. She already disliked the man. Eames twiddled a gold pen as if it were a magic wand which could solve all her problems. "How can I help you?"

"Please understand," she said, "I'm here on behalf of a friend. A friend who needs legal advice."

Again the politely knowing smile. That convenient mythical "friend." Such familiar hypocrisies, the modern substitute for the Victorian lady's veil, amused the lawyer. "Of what nature, precisely?"

"It's a question of bigamy. *Possibility*, I should say, of bigamy. I—that is, my friend wants to know if it ranks as a misdemeanor or something more serious."

"In this state, bigamy is a Class E felony. Depending on the circumstances, it can carry a fairly stiff prison sentence."

"Circumstances?"

"If it involves a willful disregard of a prior marriage, that's one thing. Ignorance of a bigamous relationship is another. For example, suppose a man accepts in good faith that his wife obtained a Mexican divorce. It later transpires that the Mexican decree was fraudulent.

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Such a situation is quite different from his willfully ignoring a prior marriage when entering into a second."

Anne nodded. "Then tell me this. Suppose the first wife were to die. Would the second marriage—the bigamous marriage—automatically acquire legal validity?"

If the lawyer's answer to this appeared somewhat ambiguous, his manner more cautious, Anne was satisfied that she knew all it was necessary to know. "As of now," she said, "my friend has only a suspicion that the marriage may not be legal. Or perhaps the other may not be. She can't be certain which marriage came first."

Eames pondered this. "One assumes your friend is basing her doubts on something more than a mere hunch."

"As I said, the possibility exists."

"May I ask if the spouse has been confronted with your friend's suspicions?"

"Not yet. She doesn't want to create difficulties if they should prove groundless."

"In other words, if I understand you correctly, what you're asking me is how your friend should proceed to verify her suspicions."

"Precisely."

"Then it might be advisable for her to engage the services of a reputable private-inquiry agency."

"Could you recommend such an agency?"

Mr. Eames could.

They were in bed, wide awake, listening to the steady beat of the rain on the slate roof overhead. Jennifer's hand lay on his smooth, hairless chest, idly sketching widening circles with one finger, then resting her palm to feel the sluggish motion of his heart.

"I suppose what I'll miss most is my studio," she said.

"You can paint in London. It's only a hobby, after all. You don't sell your work. You're even too modest to show it to anyone. It's not as if you were a real artist—*ouch!*"

She pinched him even harder. "Thanks very much."

"Darling, you know what I mean. You can't say I don't encourage you. Didn't I spend a bundle equipping the barn as a studio? I think it's marvelous your having an interest to occupy you while I'm in the city. You can fix up some sort of studio in London. After all, we're not going to live in what they call a bed-sitter over there."

"You really deceived me, didn't you?"

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His face turned toward her with a sudden jerk of his head. "I what?"

"Well, didn't you? That first time we met, at the opening of your client Ackermann's gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. Pretending you were really interested in art when you were only there out of a sense of duty."

"Until I had the good luck to meet you."

"I thought at first you were just another artist. You didn't look like a rich stockbroker. I had to learn that from Ackermann."

"You were pretty mysterious yourself." He took her face in his hands. "I sometimes think you'd respect me more if I *were* an artist."

"Only if you were a madly successful one."

"No, seriously. Are you ever sorry you married me?"

She kissed him lightly on the lips. "How could I be? I got exactly what I wanted."

"So did I. But not many beautiful wives would put up with an arrangement like this."

She laughed softly in his ear. "I'd rather live in a castle with a weekend prince than in a third-floor walkup with a scruffy peasant."

"I still don't believe you lived in a third-floor walkup."

"You know I did, even if I had too much pride to invite you up."

"England is full of castles. Maybe I'll buy you a real one. And be more than a weekend prince."

"Make that a promise," she murmured, "and I won't say another word against the move."

Anne was astonished at what little effort it required to confirm what, after all, had been only a suspicion. Before the end of the following week, she had the evidence in her hand: time, date, place, photostat of the marriage license. The ensuing long weekend was the most painful she'd ever endured. She prayed for Monday and hoped it would never arrive. What would he do, she wondered, when she faced him with the evidence? What would he say? How would he react? Dearly as he might wish to, he could hardly deny the facts.

On Monday she phoned the office and told them she wouldn't be in. She packed Bobby off to school early so he wouldn't be home when Newton arrived. And now, as if to torture her already inflamed nerves, it appeared he was going to be late. When an hour passed with no sign of him, she phoned his office—but he hadn't, as sometimes happened, gone straight there.

Over the weekend she had considered a choice of options. Now,

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suddenly, she decided to act on the least appealing and hastily prepared to leave the apartment before Newton arrived.

She rented a car at the train station in the village and drove north. After a night-long rain, the dripping trees made a gloomy tunnel of the lane that led eventually to the house, solid and grey as the metallic sky overhead. She parked in the circular drive in front of the plum-colored door and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, struggling to compose herself before attacking the citadel. The garage doors were shut, the house silent.

She got out and rang the bell. No one answered. She began to hope no one would, for now it seemed the most insane of impulses to have come chasing down here, not to have talked to Newton first. Unnerved by the leaden silence, the empty, staring windows, she went back to the car, leaned in, and gave two long blasts on the horn.

"Hello," said Jennifer, appearing from around the side of the house. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you drive in."

Anne had expected astonishment, weeping denials, open hostility. Jennifer's reaction bordered instead on panic. Her face seemed unable to regain its color. "How did you find out?"

"I hired a detective. It took him less than a week." Anne looked around the room. Newton's photograph on the mantel shelf seemed to regard her with a politely ambiguous smile.

"And you've said nothing to Newton?"

"I was going to tell him this morning, but he didn't arrive at the usual time. His train is often late. I suddenly took it into my head to come down here to see you."

Jennifer sat in a wingback chair as stiffly as a mannequin in a store window. Anne felt suddenly drained of the rage that had fired her thoughts on the long trip from the city. She started to say something when a sound interrupted her. They both looked toward the door as a man in jeans and a rain-spattered denim jacket appeared, stopped short on entering the room.

Jennifer sprang up. For a long moment no one spoke. Anne saw in the man's eyes a confused look of alarm and uncertainty. He was slim, wide-shouldered, with a short ponytail of blond hair. The matching deep clefts in his forehead and chin reminded Anne of an actor whose name she couldn't remember.

Jennifer looked at Anne. "This is—"

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"I know who he is," said Anne. "I saw his photograph at the gallery in the Village. Caskey, isn't it?"

He moved slowly across the room to stand beside Jennifer.

"This is Anne Holding," she said. "Newton's sister."

"I recognized the house in the picture at once," Anne said. "And Jennifer, even though her face wasn't shown. I assumed it must have been one of her own paintings, though Newton told me she never exhibited her work. I thought of buying it, but when I went back and asked the man at the gallery about it he said the artist's name was Caskey. And the title of the picture was *Portrait of the Artist's Wife.* A stupid thing to do, wasn't it, showing that picture?"

"More vain than stupid," said Jennifer tightly. "I tried to tell him. He wouldn't listen."

Caskey's sullen-arrogant expression hardened. "Lady, do you have any idea what it's like trying to make it without money or patronage as an artist, to get a showing in even the crummiest gallery? I was going to give it all up. We weren't starving. Jen had her job, such as it was. We were living in a lousy walkup when Jen met Newton at a gallery opening uptown.

"It was love at first sight for Newton, poor sap. Jen didn't bother telling him she was married. It all just happened. We didn't plan it—not until he told her about his place in the country and how he only came down here for the weekends and lived at his widowed sister's apartment during the week. It seemed like the answer to all our problems. Jen painted a little as a hobby. Newton was glad to fix her up with a studio. So he got what he wanted and I got what I wanted—a place to paint, the means to keep painting."

The heartless confession of how they had duped her brother rekindled Anne's anger. "How long did you think you could get away with it?"

"Until my work caught the eye of the right people. I'm a damn good painter. It's just a matter of time."

"Then Jennifer would leave Newton," Anne said bitterly. "Never knowing how he'd been used."

"Art is more important than domestic arrangements."

"You're a third-rate artist," Anne told him coldly. "So where do you spend the weekends?"

"I have a room in town."

"You must be insane, both of you."

"We're desperate," said Caskey, "not insane."

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Anne looked at Jennifer. "Bigamy's a felony. You could go to jail."

"What are you going to do?" Caskey asked her.

"I've already done it. By the time Newton learns the truth, I trust you'll both be long gone. I want to spare my brother as much pain as possible. He loves Jennifer. I never quite understood why." She stood up.

"I'm leaving now. I suggest you do the same. I'd guess you have less than half an hour before the police arrive. Oh, yes, I gave them all the evidence before coming down here. A warrant has probably been issued by now. If I were you, I wouldn't waste any time. If you disappear quietly, I think there may be a chance, knowing Newton as I do, that he won't have you prosecuted. But take my advice. Don't hang around to find out."

Panic, fiercely held at bay until Anne was gone, washed over them. "Don't be stupid," Caskey shouted at Jennifer, "you heard what she said! There's no time to bury him and get rid of the car—we'll be lucky if we have time to pack a couple of bags!"

"*Lucky!* Our luck ran out when you stopped listening to me!"

He turned wildly from the window. "Don't pretend it wasn't your idea to get rid of him eventually. Make it look like suicide. Play the tragic widow. Inherit everything. It was just a question of choosing the right time, you said!"

"The right time!" Her voice broke on a note of rising hysteria. "We certainly chose the right time, didn't we? He's hanging out there in the barn and now no one's going to believe he strung him*self* up. Thanks to his sweet little sister, we've hung ourselves!"

"Not if we get the hell out of here while there's still time."

"And go *where?*" she cried. "There's noplace on earth we can go where they won't find us!"

"Stop whining," he said, "and start packing. I'll get the car out."

Anger gave way to grim satisfaction as Anne boarded the train, her doubts gradually evaporating even as patches of blue sky appeared between the clouds. She felt confident she had done the right thing. Mention of the police had clearly shaken them both. In fact, the terror neither of them had quite been able to hide seemed out of all proportion to the gravity of their offense. What fools—were they really so naive as to believe she'd put the police onto them before saying a word to Newton? Or that a warrant could be issued so easily?

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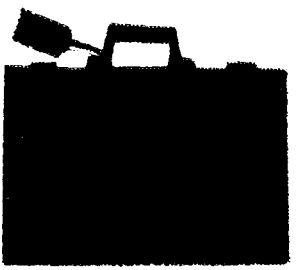
Newton would be hurt, dreadfully hurt, but in time he'd get over it. The move to England would help. He could put that house and all its memories behind him.

England. Christmas in England. Her spirits rose at the thought. Why *shouldn't* she and Bobby go over for the holidays? Newton would be lonely. He'd need the comfort of family.



DETECTIVERSE

TWO HEARTS AS ONE

by CAROLYN J. ROSE

While stabbing his wife in the chest,
Gerhardt suffered cardiac arrest.
He silently swore
As they fell to the floor,
"She *warned* me not to get stressed!"

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Jennifer laughed. "So far, we haven't been the least bit disappointed in America . . ."

CULTURE SHOCK

by LORRAINE COLLINS

I hadn't ever seen the ladies before, but I didn't have any trouble picking them out of the crowd. Everybody else in the Phoenix Airport was wearing tank tops and shorts and sunglasses and sandals. After all, it was March and they'd just come down from Peoria or someplace up north and they'd dressed for sun and fun. They wanted to fit right in. But there the two ladies were—my customers.

They were what we call middle-aged, and they both wore dark tweed suits, tan raincoats, and shoes that looked sturdy enough to go tramping over the moors. So I smiled and went up and said, "Miss Barrington? Miss Kenton? I'm Jack Parker, your driver."

The taller one beamed at me. "Why, how clever of you to recognize us! Jennifer, isn't he clever to spot us right off?" She shook my hand vigorously and nodded her long oval head, making her straight-cut, jaw-length black hair bob vigorously. When she smiled, I thought she sure had a lot of teeth.

The one called Jennifer smiled shyly and sort of ducked her head. She was a head shorter than the other, a rosy-cheeked little lady with grey hair. She looked just like I always thought an English lady would look. She seemed to be trying to huddle inconspicuously as her blue eyes blinked at me through her gold-rimmed glasses. "Well, that's nice, Daphne," she said, glancing around the airport, noticing that quite a few people were staring at them, "but do we really want to be so—umm—outstanding?"

Daphne considered a minute and then nodded. "Quite right. Mr. Parker—if you please." She handed me their baggage tickets and said, "If you'll collect these, we can proceed directly to a shop and become Arizonans!" She laughed. "In Boston, we fit right in. But, my goodness, America is *such* a big country! I suppose this is our first bit of culture shock!"

I went and got their baggage. It was just one small bag apiece,

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and I wondered how long they expected to be in the States. My orders were simply to pick them up and take them wherever they wanted to go, but I didn't know where that was. After we left the airport, the first place we stopped was a shopping mall where they could get some "Arizona" clothes—which turned out to be cotton slacks, T-shirts, tennis shoes, and windbreakers. Then I drove them down to Casa Grande, where they wanted to spend their first night in Arizona.

Most people just rent a car, but two English ladies who think driving on the right side of the road is driving on the wrong side of the road needed a guy like me to show them around. They had the idea of calling an employment agency for somebody with a car, and my name was on the list, so I got the job and I was glad of it. I'd only been visiting in Phoenix a couple of weeks, on account of being laid off in L.A., but my brother-in-law was already suggesting, not too subtly, that I might find useful work.

The tall, skinny one, who was named Daphne Barrington, talked quite a bit on the way to Casa Grande, like she wanted to explain what they were up to. She said, "We're doing the reverse of what so many of you Americans do. So many Americans come to England looking for ancestors, you know?"

"You're looking for American ancestors?" I glanced in the rearview mirror and could see she was making a sort of toothy grimace, like a member of the Royal family trying to show enthusiasm at a barbecue.

She frowned and said, "No, not for ancestors. We're looking for *descendents*. You realize that when part of a family comes to America, part stays in England. And occasionally we English become curious about what happens to our American cousins."

"No kidding? So you ladies have American relatives in Arizona?"

"Well, we really don't know."

Jennifer cleared her throat apologetically. "Daphne had a great uncle—your grandmother's brother, wasn't it, Daphne?—who came to Arizona."

"Yes, quite right. He came to Arizona for—I think it was silver mining. But we've lost track of that branch of the family." She laughed. "Perhaps they made a fortune. And that's why we particularly want to see this little place called San Miguel. Or near there. That's where the mine was. I understand it's quite far removed from civilization, but we do want to see it."

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"No problem, ladies," I said. It all sounded reasonable enough at the time.

When we got to the motel, they asked if I'd go in and register for them and wanted to know if they had to show their passports. I said no, and Daphne said, "Well, then, Mr. Parker, just put both rooms in your name if that's all right." She handed me two hundred-dollar bills. "And then perhaps there would be enough left for you to bring us one of those delicious American hamburgers? We're rather tired after the journey."

That was okay with me. I got them their room and the food, and spent the rest of the evening watching television. Next morning they were all decked out in their new clothes and said they were rested up from jet lag and they could hardly wait to start exploring Arizona.

"Well," Daphne said, standing straight and tall and looking as proud as a commander of the Cold Stream Guards, "do you think we *fit in*, Mr. Parker?"

I coughed and said, "Call me Jack. And, uh, yes, you look very American. But of course you don't sound like it."

Jennifer Kenton frowned and said, "He's right, Daphne. You'll just have to learn to keep your mouth shut."

Daphne was offended. "Really, Jennifer!"

"Well, we don't want to be *too* conspicuous, do we?" She seemed to be blushing, as she turned back to me. "We do feel awfully *noticeable* out here in the American West. I know you must think of us as greenhorns. Isn't that the word?"

I had to laugh. They must have seen a lot of old westerns. But I was polite. I said, "Well, I don't know if anybody has used that word lately. But people are nuts about the English out here. We even have your old London Bridge over on Lake Havasu! They'd love to hear you talk."

"Nevertheless—"

"You're quite right," Daphne told her companion. "When we're in public, we'll just be still as mice if we don't have something important to say."

We were almost to Tucson before the dainty little one, Jennifer, leaned forward to ask in this calm and cheerful voice, "Jack, where do you keep your gun?"

I said, "What?"

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She said, "Well, all Americans carry guns, don't they? That's what we've been given to understand. You *do* have one, don't you?" I glanced over my shoulder, and she looked really worried. Well, of course I had a pistol in the glove compartment, on account of I'd been living in L.A. until two weeks before. But I didn't intend to admit it until Jennifer clutched my shoulder hard and said, "Of course we *assumed*—"

So I said yes, I had a gun, and pointed to the glove box. I said it was in case we had to shoot a rattlesnake or some other emergency came along, but they shouldn't worry about it. They didn't look worried at all, to tell the truth. They looked relaxed and smug. "I told you so!" Jennifer said to Daphne.

Actually, I'd never heard of a little town called San Miguel and I couldn't find it on the map until Jennifer showed me the dot at the end of a dim grey broken line that indicated an unimproved dirt road. I'd say it was "quite far removed from civilization," all right. It being Arizona, we had to pass through an Indian reservation, a wildlife refuge, and a bombing range to get to it. When we got there, the town was just a wide spot in the dusty road with an adobe bar on one side and a decrepit general store with two gas pumps on the other side. The sun was beating down on the empty street and it looked like we'd come to the end of the earth.

"How—picturesque," Daphne said, but she sounded like she'd come across something that didn't smell too good.

I was slowing down when Daphne told me to keep on going through the town and take the first road left, toward the mountains on the horizon. She said the mine we were looking for would be in the foothills about eight miles away.

When we turned onto the road that was even worse than the one we'd been on, I glanced back and saw both ladies leaning forward, blushing with heat and excitement.

Eventually we came to a faded wooden sign saying EXCALIBUR MINING COMPANY, where a trail led toward some old tin sheds and a long, low adobe building. Daphne told me to turn in there.

I guess it could have been a mine a long, long while ago, but it didn't look like much now. I thought it would be deserted, but there was a beat-up old pickup parked in front of the main building.

I parked the car next to the truck and we got out. Jennifer was on my side of the car and she put her hand on my arm. "Mr. Parker—Jack," she said, smiling up at me gently, "I'd feel much better if you'd take your gun with you."

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That surprised me, but then Jennifer said, "Oh, please, Jack. The place does look rather *desperate*, doesn't it? One never knows who one will encounter."

Then, all of a sudden, Daphne made a brisk, no-nonsense move and opened the front door on the passenger's side. She punched the button on the glove box and brought the gun out.

I said, "Hey!" but she flashed those teeth and said, "Never mind, I'll just carry it for you." She pulled the pistol out of its holster and stood there pointing it at me, holding it out straight in front of her.

I yelled, "Hey, that thing's loaded! Watch where you're pointing it!"

"Oh, I'll be quite careful with it," she told me.

"Well, then," Jennifer said, twinkling with delight, "let's go in." Daphne motioned me forward with the pistol, and I led the way, trying not to think of that .38 pointed at my back.

I opened the rickety screen door, pushed in a heavy wood door, and stepped into a large bare room that was in a sort of twilight. The only light in the place came from the windows. Along the back there was a doorway leading to another room, and just as the front door slammed shut a man came out of the room. Big, dark-haired, about thirty years old, he stood blinking at us. "What the hell?" he said. "Who are you?"

I moved to one side and then he saw Daphne, holding the pistol in her hand like she was about to present a bunch of flowers to the Queen. "Mr. Burton?" she said briskly. "We've come to collect that parcel."

The guy stood there, staring at the pistol. Finally he said, "What?"

"The one you're saving for Beatrice. You *do* have it? You wouldn't have gotten rid of it already? I think she called to say she'd be here today to give you proof of the authenticity? I mean, there's always been the question, hasn't there?"

The guy looked like he'd been hit over the head with a two-by-four. He slumped back against the door frame, pale with shock. "Just who the hell *are* you?"

Jennifer smiled sweetly and said, "That's quite irrelevant. We won't be here long. We just need to collect the parcel and we'll be off." She sure did seem forceful all of a sudden. She glanced over her shoulder at Daphne and smiled like an imp. "My friend here has an itchy trigger finger—I may not be able to restrain her."

Burton gave a little giggle and looked at me. "Who are your lady

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friends? You're keeping tough company, aren't you?" But he was beginning to sweat. Like me. I said, "I guess you've got something they want. I guess you'd better give it to them."

Burton stood straighter. His fists were clenched and he was looking like a man who wasn't going to be scared of two little old ladies, even if one of them had a gun.

He smirked. "I don't know what you're talking about, ladies, but you'd better quit playing games."

I was horrified to see that Daphne had found the safety on my gun and she was pushing it off. Her eyes were bright as she said, "Shall we make him dance, Jennifer?"

They were playing a scene from western movies forty, fifty years ago! Where'd these ladies *been?*

Before I could say anything, there was a sudden explosion, and I ducked, crouching and covering my head with my arms. Daphne had fired a shot directly at Burton's feet. He yelped and jumped backward. Even Jennifer jumped, but Daphne stood still as a rock, both hands holding the pistol out in front of her like cops do on TV. She was smiling grimly, a gleam of satisfaction in her eye. Burton had his hands in the air. I thought that was a good idea, so I got back on my feet and put my hands up, too. "For God's sake, give it to them!" I pleaded.

Burton was pale and quivering. "Oh, hell, it's back there." He nodded his head toward the back room.

Jennifer moved fast, scurrying across the room, ducking around Burton in the doorway and rummaging around for a minute. When she came back, she was holding up a cardboard tube maybe a foot and a half long. "This is it!" she glowed in triumph.

Daphne kept her eyes on Burton. "Open it up, make certain."

Jennifer pulled off the lid of the tube and pulled out a rolled-up piece of canvas. I stared at it, but Burton didn't even look. He stared at Daphne.

"You the aunt?" he said. "Bea said she had an aunt who was a holy terror."

"This is it," Jennifer confirmed. "Not damaged, I think. Not badly." She looked at Burton and scolded him. "You should have kept it in proper air-conditioning. The dust and filth of this place—"

It was a painting. A rolled-up painting with a lot of blues and greens in it. Jennifer handled it very carefully as she rolled it back up.

Daphne said, "Turn around, Mr. Burton. Show me your back."

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He didn't want to, but he did. His voice was a thin whisper when he said, "What are you going to do?"

Daphne let the gun down, but Burton couldn't see that. She wiped sweat from her forehead with her left hand and sighed. "Bea will not be coming to the States, after all, Mr. Burton. She regrets helping you steal the painting and she will not communicate with you again. The only reason I'm not prosecuting you is to protect my niece. But if you cause any further trouble, I will notify the authorities."

"Look, it was her idea—"

"It was *not* her idea. She's had access to my friends' homes for many years and has never shown the slightest inclination to covet *any* of their pictures. Her regrettable association with you led her astray. But she will be quite all right now—"

She asked Jennifer if there were any other doors in the back room, and when Jennifer said there weren't, she told Burton to go back in there, sit on the floor, and count to twenty thousand. "Even if you hear our car," she said, "I'd advise you not to come out until you've reached the entire sum of twenty thousand. That's how many pounds this particular painting is worth and I wouldn't like to be short-changed."

"It's worth *what?*" Burton jerked his head around, but when he saw Daphne's gun he turned away again.

As soon as we got outside, Daphne frowned at the truck parked there and—almost as an afterthought—she shot out both front tires. I was so jumpy, I thought I'd been shot myself. I couldn't get in my car fast enough. Daphne got in the front beside me and held the pistol in her lap. She told me to drive to Nogales as fast as I could without attracting attention.

On the road, Jennifer began to laugh. "Oh, that was such *fun*, Daphne. I do like the Wild West. It's just the way I thought it would be."

A smile tugged at Daphne's face, and she finally laughed, too. She looked at me and said, "Poor Beatrice was quite overwhelmed with the glamour of that Arizona mining engineer. At least, that's what he said he was—but he needed a *stake*, I believe he called it. The Porterfields' painting was the stake, and I told them I would get it back for them. Privately, with as little fuss as possible. They are willing not to prosecute Beatrice under the circumstances."

Jennifer gave a malicious giggle. "The circumstances being that

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it's not a real Cezanne, of course. That poor chap must have been thinking millions!"

Daphne turned and glared at her. "The Porterfields have never claimed it was an actual Cezanne. But of course if the public wishes to assume—" She turned back to look at me, still pointing the gun. "Believe me," she said with that toothy grimace, "it's a very valuable painting whether it's actually a Cezanne or not."

"I'm sure it is."

She nodded. "And this way, we're all spared so much embarrassment, so many awkward questions."

"Quite," I croaked.

Some miles later, when I could finally get a word or two more out of my parched throat, I asked what they had expected to do if I didn't happen to have a gun.

Jennifer laughed. "Oh, but you *did* have! So far, we haven't been the least bit disappointed in America."

Daphne said, "We had thought simple persuasion would be sufficient for Mr. Burton to return the picture, but when in America—well, if you had a gun we thought we might as well use it." She smiled.

I kept wondering what they had in mind for me.

When we were on the north edge of Nogales, Daphne told me to stop and she opened the glove box to punch the button to open the trunk so Jennifer could get their bags out.

Jennifer scurried out to haul the luggage into the back seat and they told me to drive straight to the border crossing downtown, where people can park their cars and walk across. I did, and the ladies got out and took their bags and the tube. Then Daphne leaned in the front window.

She said there was an envelope in the back seat that would show their appreciation for my cooperation and that she was depending on my discretion. Then she emptied the shells out of my gun and tossed it on the floor in back.

"We thought we might enjoy visiting Mexico while we're here," she said.

Jennifer waved, looking cheerful as ever. "Ta ta! If you're ever in England—"

They joined a busload of tourists pouring across the border and disappeared.

Cars were honking at me and I had to get out of the way. I drove

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out of town a way and sat on a hill looking over the border to Mexico, wondering if they had really crossed the border or were on their way to the Nogales Airport or Tucson or Phoenix.

There was quite a bit of money in that envelope in the back seat.

I wondered about going to the police, but what would I say and how would I explain the money and everything? Then I thought about Jennifer saying, "If you're ever in England—"

I didn't think I ever would be. I started the car and headed north toward Phoenix. But when I got up to Highway 8, I just turned west and headed back for California instead. I knew my brother-in-law would be pleased—and, besides, California is as far from England as you can get without crossing the Pacific Ocean.

DETECTIVERSE

CURTAIN

by SARAH GILBERT

As the actress emoted on stage,
The playwright exploded with rage:
"She's killing each line
In this play of mine!"
She died on the very next page.

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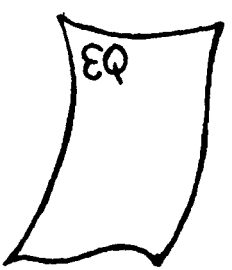
Charlotte Armstrong (1905–1969) contributed not only a great many novels and short stories to the mystery genre but also several plays (The Happiest Days, Ring Around Elizabeth) *and movies* (The Unsuspected, Don't Bother To Knock). *In* Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *the major theme of her work is described by Carol Cleveland:*

"It is the people who live as though their behavior mattered who manage to get themselves out of some very tight places, or to save the innocents who are threatened by the forces of evil. Again and again, the good prevail because they come up with the understanding, the courage, the resourcefulness, or the friends that tip the balance. The evil doers include the greedy, the manipulators, the plotters, and, above all, those who lie to themselves as well as others."

Those readers who are encountering Charlotte Armstrong's fiction here for the first time will, we think, be moved to track down more of her work. Most of her novels were originally published by Coward McCann. While "The Enemy" was written some decades ago, it speaks to today as well as to the not-that-innocent past we tend to romanticize out of nostalgia . . .



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THE ENEMY

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

They sat at the lunch table and afterward moved through the dim, cool, high-ceilinged rooms to the judge's library where, in their quiet talk, the old man's past and the young man's future seemed to telescope and touch. But at twenty minutes after three, on that hot, bright June Saturday afternoon, the present tense erupted. Out in the quiet street arose the sound of trouble.

Judge Kittinger adjusted his pince-nez, rose, and led the way to his old-fashioned veranda from which they could overlook the tree-roofed intersection of Greenwood Lane and Hannibal Street. Near the steps to the corner house opposite, there was a surging knot of children and one man. Now, from the house on the judge's left, a woman in a blue housedress ran diagonally toward the excitement. And a police car slipped up Hannibal Street, gliding to the curb. One tall officer plunged into the group and threw restraining arms around a screaming boy.

Mike Russell, saying to his host, "Excuse me, sir," went rapidly across the street. Trouble's center was the boy, ten or eleven years old, a towheaded boy with tawny-lashed blue eyes, a straight nose, a fine brow. The woman in the blue dress was yammering at him. "Freddy! Freddy! Freddy!" Her voice simply did not reach his ears.

"You ole stinker! You rotten ole stinker! You ole nut!" All the boy's heart was in the epithets.

"Now, listen—" The cop shook the boy, who, helpless in those powerful hands, yet blazed. His fury had stung to crimson the face of the grown man at whom it was directed.

This man, who stood with his back to the house as one besieged, was plump, half bald, with eyes much magnified by glasses. "Attacked me!" he cried in a high whine. "Rang my bell and absolutely leaped on me!"

Out of the seven or eight small boys clustered around them came overlapping fragments of shrill sentences. It was clear only that they opposed the man. A small woman in a print dress, a man in

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shorts whose bare chest was winter-white, stood a little apart, hesitant and distressed. Up on the veranda of the house the screen door was half open and a woman seated in a wheelchair peered forth anxiously.

On the green grass, in the shade, perhaps thirty feet away, there lay in death a small brown-and-white dog.

The judge's luncheon guest observed all this. When the judge drew near, there was a lessening of the noise. Judge Kittinger said, "This is Freddy Titus, isn't it? Mr. Matlin? What's happened?"

The man's head jerked. "I did nothing to the dog. Why would I trouble to hurt the boy's dog? I try—you know this, Judge—I try to live in peace here. But these kids are terrors! They've made this block a perfect hell for me and my family." The man's voice shook. "My wife, who isn't strong—my stepdaughter, who's a cripple—These kids are no better than a slum gang. They're vicious! That boy rang my bell and *attacked*—! I'll have him up for assault! I—"

The judge's face was old ivory and he was aloof behind it.

On the porch, a girl pushed past the woman in the wheelchair, a girl who walked with a lurching gait.

Mike Russell asked quietly, "Why do the boys say it was you, Mr. Matlin, who hurt the dog?"

The kids chorused. "He's an ole, mean—" "He's a nut!" "Just because—" "Took Clive's bat and—" "Chases us—" "Tries to put everything on *us*—" "Told my mother lies!" "Just because—"

He's our enemy, they were saying. *He's our enemy.*

"They—" began Matlin, his throat thick with anger.

"Hold it a minute." The second cop, the thin one, walked toward where the dog was lying.

"Somebody," said Mike Russell in a low voice, "must do something for the boy."

The judge looked down at the frantic child. He said gently, "I'm as sorry as I can be, Freddy." But in his old heart there was too much known, and too many little dogs he remembered that had already died, and even if he were as sorry as he could be, he couldn't be sorry enough. The boy's eyes turned, rejected, returned. To the enemy.

Russell moved near the woman in blue, who pertained to this boy somehow. "His mother?"

"His folks are away. I'm there to take care of him," she snapped, as if she felt herself put upon by a crisis she had not contracted to face.

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"Can they be reached?"

"No," she said decisively.

The young man put his stranger's hand on the boy's rigid little shoulder. But he, too, was rejected. Freddy's eyes, brilliant with hatred, clung to the enemy. Hatred doesn't cry.

"Listen," said the tall cop, "if you could hang onto him for a minute—"

"Not me," said Russell.

The thin cop came back. "Looks like the dog got poison. When was he found?"

"Just now," the kids said.

"Where? There?"

"Up Hannibal Street. Right on the edge of ole Matlin's back lot."

"Edge of *my* lot!" Matlin's color freshened again. "On the sidewalk, why don't you say? Why don't you tell the truth?"

"We are! *We* don't tell lies!"

"Quiet, you guys," the cop said. "Pipe down now."

"Heaven's my witness, I wasn't even here!" cried Matlin. "I played nine holes of golf today. I didn't get home until—May?" he called over his shoulder. "What time did I come in?"

The girl on the porch came slowly down, moving awkwardly on her uneven legs. She was in her twenties, no child. Nor was she a woman. She said in a blurting manner, "About three o'clock, Daddy Earl. But the dog was dead."

"What's that, Miss?"

"This is my stepdaughter—"

"The dog was dead," the girl said, "before he came home. I saw it from upstairs, before three o'clock. Lying by the sidewalk."

"You drove in from Hannibal Street, Mr. Matlin? Looks like you'd have seen the dog."

Matlin said with nervous thoughtfulness, "I don't know. My mind— Yes, I—"

"He's telling a lie!"

"Freddy!"

"Listen to that," said May Matlin, "will you?"

"She's a liar, too!"

The cop shook Freddy. Mr. Matlin made a sound of helpless exasperation. He said to the girl, "Go keep your mother inside, May." He raised his arm as if to wave. "It's all right, honey," he called to the woman in the chair with a false cheeriness that grated on the ear. "There's nothing to worry about, now."

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Freddy's jaw shifted and young Russell's watching eyes winced. The girl began to lurch back to the house.

"It was my wife who put in the call," Matlin said. "After all, they were on me like a pack of wolves. Now, I—I *understand* that the boy's upset. But all the same, he cannot— He must learn— I won't have— I have enough to contend with without his malice, this unwarranted antagonism, this persecution."

Freddy's eyes were unwinking.

"It's got to stop!" said Matlin almost hysterically.

"Yes," murmured Mike Russell, "I should think so."

Judge Kittinger's white head, nodding, agreed.

"We've heard about quite a few dog-poisoning cases over the line in Redfern," said the thin cop with professional calm. "None here."

The man in the shorts hitched them up, looking shocked. "Who'd do a thing like that?"

A boy said boldly, "Ole Matlin would." He had an underslung jaw and wore spectacles on his snub nose. "I'm Phil Bourchard," he said to the cop. He had courage.

"We just know," said another. "I'm Ernie Allen." Partisanship radiated from his thin body. "Ole Matlin doesn't want anybody on his ole property."

"Sure." "He doesn't want anybody on his ole property." "It was ole Matlin, all right."

"It was, it was," said Freddy Titus.

"Freddy," said the housekeeper in blue, "now you better be still. I'll tell your dad." It was a meaningless fumble for control. The boy didn't even hear her.

Judge Kittinger tried patiently. "You can't accuse without cause, Freddy."

"Bones didn't hurt his ole property. Bones wouldn't hurt anything. Ole Matlin did it."

"You lying little devil!"

"*He's* a liar!"

The cop gave Freddy another shake. "You kids found him, eh?"

"We were up at Bourchards' and were going down to the Titus house."

"And he was dead," said Freddy.

"*I* know nothing about it," said Matlin icily. "Nothing at all."

The cop, standing between, said wearily, "Any of you people see what coulda happened?"

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"I was sitting in my back yard," said the man in shorts. "I'm Daugherty, next door, up Hannibal Street. I didn't see a thing."

The small woman in a print dress spoke up. "I'm Mrs. Page. I live across on the corner, Officer. I believe I did see a strange man go into Mr. Matlin's driveway this morning."

"When was this, ma'am?"

"About eleven o'clock. He was poorly dressed. He walked up the drive and around the garage."

"Didn't go to the house?"

"No. He was only there a minute. I believe he was carrying something. He was rather furtive. And very poorly dressed, almost like a tramp."

There was a certain relaxing among the elders. "Ah, the tramp," said Mike Russell. "The good old reliable tramp. Are you sure, Mrs. Page? It's very unlikely that—"

But she bristled. "Do you think I'm lying?"

Russell's lips parted, but he felt the judge's hand on his arm. "This is my guest, Mr. Russell—Freddy." The judge's voice was gentle. "Let him go, Officer. I'm sure he understands now. Mr. Matlin wasn't even at home, Freddy. It's possible that this—er, stranger— Or it may have been an accident."

"Wasn't a tramp. Wasn't an accident."

"You can't *know* that, boy," said the judge somewhat sharply. Freddy said nothing. As the officer slowly released his grasp, the boy took a free step backward and the other boys surged to surround him. There stood the enemy, the monster who killed and lied, and the grownups with their reasonable doubts were on the monster's side. But the boys knew what Freddy knew. They stood together.

"Somebody," murmured the judge's guest, "somebody's got to help the boy." And the judge sighed.

The cops went up Hannibal Street, toward Matlin's back lot, with Mr. Daugherty. Matlin lingered at the corner talking to Mrs. Page. In the front window of Matlin's house, the curtain fell across the glass.

Mike Russell sidled up to the housekeeper. "Any uncles or aunts here in town? A grandmother?"

"No," she said shortly.

"Brothers or sisters, Mrs. —?"

"Miz Somers. No, he's the only one. Only reason they didn't take him along was it's the last week of school and he didn't want to miss."

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Mike Russell's brown eyes suggested the soft texture of velvet, and they were deeply distressed. She slid away from their appeal. "He'll just have to take it, I guess, like everybody else," Mrs. Somers said. "These things happen."

He was listening intently. "Don't you care for dogs?"

"I don't mind a dog," she said. She arched her neck. She was going to call to the boy.

"Wait. Tell me, does the family go to church? Is there a pastor or a priest who knows the boy?"

"They don't go, far as I ever saw." She looked at him as if he were an eccentric.

"Then school. He has a teacher. What grade?"

"Sixth grade," she said. "Miss Dana. Oh, he'll be okay." Her voice grew loud, to reach the boy and hint to him. "He's a big boy."

Russell said desperately, "Is there no way to telephone his parents?"

"They're on the road. They'll be in sometime tomorrow, that's all I know." She was annoyed. "I'll take care of him. That's why I'm here." She raised her voice and this time it was arch and seductive. "Freddy, better come wash your face. I know where there's some chocolate cookies."

The velvet left the young man's eyes. Hard as buttons, they gazed for a moment at the woman. Then he whipped around and left her. He walked over to where the kids had drifted, near the little dead creature on the grass. He said softly, "Bones had his own doctor, Freddy? Tell me his name." The boy's eyes flickered. "We must know what it was that he took. A doctor can tell. I think his own doctor would be best, don't you?"

The boy nodded, mumbled a name, an address. That Russell mastered the name and the number, asking for no repetition, was a sign of his concern. Besides, it was this young man's quality—that he listened. "May I take him, Freddy? I have a car. We ought to have a blanket," he added gently, "a soft, clean blanket."

"I got one, Freddy." "My mother'd let me—"

"I can get one," Freddy said brusquely. They wheeled, almost in formation.

Mrs. Somers frowned.

"You must let them take a blanket," Russell warned her, and his eyes were cold.

"I'll explain to Mrs. Titus," said the judge quickly.

"Quite a fuss," she said, and tossed her head and crossed the road.

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Russell gave the judge a quick, nervous grin. He walked to the returning cops. "You'll want to run tests, I suppose. Can the dog's own vet do it?"

"Certainly. Humane officer will have to be in charge. But that's what the vet'll want."

"I'll take the dog, then. Any traces up there?"

"Not a thing."

"Will you explain to the boy that you're investigating?"

"Well, you know how these things go." The cop's feet shuffled. "Humane officer does what he can. Probably, Monday, after we identify the poison, he'll check the drugstores. Usually, if it *is* a cranky neighbor, he has already put in a complaint about the dog. This Matlin says he never did. The humane officer will get on it Monday. He's out of town today. The devil of these cases, we can't prove a thing, usually. You get an idea who it was, maybe you can scare him. It's a misdemeanor, all right. Never heard of a conviction, myself."

"But will you explain to the boy?" Russell stopped, chewed his lip, and the judge sighed.

"Yeah, it's tough on a kid," the cop said.

When the judge's guest came back, it was nearly five o'clock. He said, "I came to say goodbye, sir, and to thank you for the—" But his mind wasn't on the sentence and he lost it and looked up.

The judge's eyes were affectionate. "Worried?"

"Judge," the young man said, "*must* they feed him? Where, sir, in this classy neighborhood is there an understanding woman's heart? I herded them to that Mrs. Allen. But she winced, and she diverted them. She didn't want to think about it. She offered cakes and cokes and games."

"But, my dear boy—"

"What do they teach the kids these days, Judge? To turn away? Put something in your stomach. Take a drink. Play a game. Don't weep for your dead. Just skip it, think about something else."

"I'm afraid the boy's alone," the judge said, "but it's only for the night." His voice was melodious. "Can't be sheltered from grief when it comes. None of us can."

"Excuse me, sir, but I wish he *would* grieve. I wish he would bawl his heart out. Wash out that black hate. I ought to go home. It's none of my concern. It's a woman's job." He moved and his hand

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went toward the phone. "He has a teacher. I can't help feeling concerned, sir. May I try?"

The judge said, "Of course, Mike," and he put his brittle old bones into a chair.

Mike Russell pried the number out of the Board of Education. "Miss Lillian Dana? My name is Russell. You know a boy named Freddy Titus?"

"Oh, yes. He's in my class." The voice was pleasing.

"Miss Dana, there's trouble. You know Judge Kittinger's house? Could you come there?"

"What is the trouble?"

"Freddy's little dog is dead of poison. I'm afraid Freddy's in a bad state. There's no one to help him. His folks are away. The woman taking care of him—" Mike's careful explanatory sentences burst into indignation "—has no more sympathetic imagination than a broken clothes pole." He heard a little gasp. "I'd like to help him, Miss Dana, but I'm a man and a stranger, and the judge—" He paused.

"Is old," said the judge in his chair.

"I'm terribly sorry," the voice on the phone said slowly. "Freddy's a wonderful boy."

"You're his friend?"

"Yes, we're friends."

"Then could you come over? You see, we've got to get a terrible idea out of his head. He thinks a man across the street poisoned his dog on purpose. Miss Dana, *he has no doubt!* And he doesn't cry." She gasped again. "Greenwood Lane," he said, "and Hannibal Street—the southeast corner."

She said, "I have a car. I'll come as soon as I can."

Russell turned and caught the judge biting his lips. "Am I making too much of this, sir?" he inquired humbly.

"I don't like the boy's stubborn conviction—" the judge's voice was dry and clear "—any more than you do. I agree that he must be brought to understand. But—" The old man shifted in the chair. "Of course, the man, Matlin, is a fool, Mike. There's something solemn and silly about him that makes him fair game. He's unfortunate. He married a widow with a crippled child, and no sooner were they married than *she* collapsed. And he's not well off. He's encumbered with that enormous house."

"What does he do, sir?"

"He's a photographer. Oh, he struggles, tries his best, and all that.

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But with such tension, Mike. That poor misshapen girl over there tries to keep the house, devoted to her mother. Matlin works hard, is devoted, too. And yet the sum comes out in petty strife, nerves, quarrels, uproar. And certainly it cannot be necessary to feud with children."

"The kids have done their share of that, I'll bet," mused Mike. "The kids are delighted—a neighborhood ogre to add the fine flavor of menace. A focus for mischief. An enemy."

"True enough." The judge sighed.

"So the myth is made. No rumor about ole Matlin loses anything in the telling. I can see it's been built up. You don't knock it down in a day."

"No," said the judge uneasily. He got up from the chair.

The young man rubbed his dark head. "I don't like it, sir. We don't know what's in the kids' minds or who their heroes are. There's only the gang. What do you suppose it advises?"

"What could it advise, after all?" said the judge crisply. "This isn't the slums, whatever Matlin says." He went nervously to the window and fiddled with the shade pull. He said suddenly, "From my little summer house in the back yard you can overhear the gang. They congregate under that oak. Go and eavesdrop, Mike."

The young man snapped to attention. "Yes, sir."

"I—think we had better know," said the judge, a trifle sheepishly.

The kids sat under the oak, in a grassy hollow. Freddy was the core. His face was tight. His eyes never left off watching the house of the enemy. The others watched him, or hung their heads, or watched their own brown hands play with the grass.

They were not chattering. There hung about them a heavy, sullen silence, heavy with a sense of tragedy, sullen with a sense of wrong, and from time to time one voice or another would fling out a pronouncement, which would sink into the silence, thickening its ugliness.

The judge looked up from his paper. "Could you—?"

"I could hear," said Mike in a quiet voice. "They're condemning the law, sir. They call it corrupt. They're quite certain that Matlin killed the dog. They see themselves as Robin Hoods, vigilantes, defending the weak, the wronged, the dog. They think they're discussing justice. They're waiting for dark. They speak of weapons, sir—the only ones they have. B.B. guns, after dark."

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"Great heavens!"

"Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stop it."

Mrs. Somers was cooking supper when he tapped on the screen. "Oh, it's you. What do you want?"

"I want your help, Mrs. Somers. For Freddy."

"Freddy," she interrupted loudly, her nose high, "is going to have his supper and go to bed his regular time, and that's all about Freddy. Now, what did you want?"

He said, "I want you to let me take the boy to my apartment for the night."

"I couldn't do that!" She was scandalized.

"The judge will vouch—"

"Now, see here, Mr. What's-your-name—Russell. This isn't my house and Freddy's not my boy. I'm responsible to Mr. and Mrs. Titus. You're a stranger to me. As far as I can see, Freddy is no business of yours whatsoever."

"Which is his room?" asked Mike sharply.

"Why do you want to know?" She was hostile and suspicious.

"Where does he keep his B.B. gun?"

She was startled to an answer. "In the shed out back. Why?"

He told her.

"Kids' talk," she scoffed. "You don't know much about kids, do you, young man? Freddy will go to sleep. First thing he'll know, it's morning. That's about the size of it."

"You may be right. I hope so."

Mrs. Somers slapped potatoes into the pan. Her lips quivered indignantly. She felt annoyed because she was a little shaken.

Russell scanned the street, went across to Matlin's house. The man himself answered the bell. The air in this house was stale and bore the faint smell of old grease. There was over everything an atmosphere of struggle and despair. Many things ought to have been repaired and had not been repaired. The place was too big. There wasn't enough money, or strength. It was too much.

Mrs. Matlin couldn't walk. Otherwise, one saw, she struggled and did the best she could. She had a lost look, as if some anxiety, ever present, took about nine-tenths of her attention. May Matlin limped in and sat down lumpishly.

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Russell began earnestly, "Mr. Matlin, I don't know how this situation between you and the boys began. I can guess that the kids are much to blame. I imagine they enjoy it." He smiled. He wanted to be sympathetic toward this man.

"Of course they enjoy it." Matlin looked triumphant.

"They call me the Witch," the girl said. "Pretend they're scared of me. I'm scared of them."

Matlin flicked a nervous eye at the woman in the wheelchair. "The truth is, Mr. Russell," he said in his high whine, "they're vicious."

"It's too bad," said his wife in a low voice. "I think it's dangerous."

"Mama, you mustn't worry," said the girl in an entirely new tone. "I won't let them hurt you. Nobody will hurt you."

"Be quiet, May," said Matlin. "You'll upset her. Of course nobody will hurt her."

"Yes, it is dangerous, Mrs. Matlin," said Russell quietly. "That's why I came over."

Matlin goggled. "What? What's this?"

"Could I possibly persuade you, sir, to spend the night away from this neighborhood? And to depart noisily?"

"No," said Matlin, his ego bristling, "no, you cannot! I will under no circumstances be driven away from my own home." His voice rose. "Furthermore, I certainly will not leave my wife and stepdaughter."

"We could manage, dear," said Mrs. Matlin anxiously.

Russell told them about the talk under the oak, the B.B. gun.

"Devils," said May Matlin, "absolutely."

"Oh, Earl," trembled Mrs. Matlin, "maybe we had all better go away."

Matlin, red-necked, furious, said, "We own this property. We pay our taxes. We have our rights. Let them! Let them try something like that! Then I think the law would have something to say. This is outrageous! I didn't harm that animal! Therefore, I defy—" He looked solemn and silly, as the judge had said, with his face crimson, his weak eyes rolling.

Russell rose. "I thought I ought to make the suggestion," he said mildly, "because it would be the safest thing to do. But don't worry, Mrs. Matlin, because I—"

"A B.B. gun can blind," she said tensely.

"Or even worse," Mike agreed. "But I'm thinking of the—"

"Just a *minute*," Matlin roared. "You can't come in here and terrify

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my wife! She's not strong. You have no right." He drew himself up with his feet at a right angle, his pudgy arm extended, his plump jowls quivering. "Get out!" he cried. He looked ridiculous.

Whether the young man and the bewildered woman in the wheelchair might have understood each other was not to be known. Russell, of course, got out. May Matlin hobbled to the door and as Russell went through it she said, "Well, you warned us, anyhow." And her lips came together sharply.

Russell plodded across the pavement again. Long enchanting shadows from the lowering sun struck aslant through the golden air and all the old houses were gilded and softened in their green setting. He moved toward the big oak. He hunkered down. The sun struck its golden shafts deep under the boughs. "How's it going?" he asked.

Freddy Titus looked frozen and still. "Okay," said Phil Bourchard with elaborate ease. Light on his owlish glasses hid the eyes.

Mike opened his lips, hesitated. Suppertime struck on the neighborhood clock. Calls, like chimes, were sounding.

"'S my mom," said Ernie Allen. "See you after."

"See you after, Freddy."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Mrs. Somers' hoot had chimed with the rest and now Freddy got up stiffly.

"Okay?" said Mike Russell. The useful syllables that take any meaning at all in American mouths asked, "Are you feeling less bitter, boy? Are you any easier?"

"Okay," said Freddy. The same syllables shut the man out.

Mike opened his lips. Closed them. Freddy went across the lawn to his kitchen door. There was a brown crockery bowl on the back stoop. His sneaker, rigid on the angle, stepped over it. Mike Russell watched, and then, with a movement of his arms, almost as if he would wring his hands, he went up the judge's steps.

"Well?" The judge opened his door. "Did you talk to the boy?"

Russell didn't answer. He sat down.

The judge stood over him. "The boy— The enormity of this whole idea *must* be explained to him."

"I can't explain," Mike said. "I open my mouth. Nothing comes out."

"Perhaps *I* had better."

"What are you going to say, sir?"

"Why, give him the facts," the judge said.

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"The facts are—the dog is dead."

"There are no facts that point to Matlin."

"There are no facts that point to a tramp, either. That's too sloppy, sir."

"What are you driving at?"

"Judge, the boy is more rightfully suspicious than we are."

"Nonsense," said the judge. "The girl saw the dog's body before Matlin came home."

"There is no alibi for poison," Mike said sadly.

"Are you saying the man is a liar?"

"Liars," sighed Mike. "Truth and lies. How are those kids going to understand, sir? To that Mrs. Page, to the lot of them, truth is only a subjective intention. 'I'm no liar,' sez she, sez he. 'I *intend* to be truthful. So don't insult me.' Lord, when will we begin? It's what we were talking about at lunch, sir. What you and I believe. What the race has been told and told in such agony, in a million years of bitter lesson. *Error*, we were saying. Error is the enemy."

He flung out of the chair. "We know that to tell the truth is not merely a good intention. It's a damned difficult thing to do. It's a skill, to be practiced. It's a technique. It's an effort. It takes brains. It takes watching. It takes humility and self-examination. It's a science and an art.

"Why don't we tell the *kids* these things? Why is everyone locked up in anger, shouting liar at the other side? Why don't they automatically know how easy it is to be, not wicked, but mistaken? Why is there this notion of violence? Because Freddy doesn't think to himself, Wait a minute, I might be wrong. The habit isn't there. Instead, there are the heroes—the big-muscled, noble-hearted, gun-toting heroes, blind in a righteousness totally arranged by the author. Excuse me, sir."

"All that may be," said the judge grimly, "and I agree. But the police know the lesson. They—"

"They don't care."

"What?"

"Don't care enough, sir. None of us cares enough—about the dog."

"I see," said the judge. "Yes, I see. We haven't the least idea what happened to the dog." He touched his pince-nez.

Mike rubbed his head wearily. "I don't know what to do except sit under his window the night through. It hardly seems good enough."

The judge said simply, "Why don't you find out what happened to the dog?"

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The young man's face changed. "What we need, sir," said Mike slowly, "is to teach Freddy how to ask for it. Just to ask for it. Just to want it." The old man and the young man looked at each other. Past and future telescoped. "*Now*," Mike said. "Before dark."

Suppertime, for the kids, was only twenty minutes long. When the girl in the brown dress with the bare blonde head got out of the shabby coupe, the gang was gathered again in its hollow under the oak. She went to them and sank down on the ground. "Ah, Freddy, was it Bones? Your dear little dog you wrote about in the essay?"

"Yes, Miss Dana." Freddy's voice was shrill and hostile. *I won't be touched!* it cried to her. So she said no more, but sat there on the ground, and presently she began to cry. There was contagion. The simplest thing in the world. First, one of the smaller ones, whimpering. Finally, Freddy Titus, bending over. Her arm guided his head, and then he lay weeping in her lap.

Russell, up in the summerhouse, closed his eyes and praised the Lord. In a little while, he swung his legs over the railing and slid down the bank. "How do? I'm Mike Russell."

"I'm Lillian Dana." She was quick and intelligent, and her tears were real.

"Fellows," said Mike briskly, "you know what's got to be done, don't you? We've got to solve this case."

They turned their woeful faces.

He said deliberately, "It's just the same as a murder. It *is* a murder."

"Yeah," said Freddy, and sat up, tears drying. "It was ole Matlin."

"Then we have to prove it."

Lillian Dana saw the boy's face lock. He didn't need to prove anything, the look proclaimed. He knew. She leaned over a little and said, "But we can't make an ugly mistake and put it on Bones's account. Bones was a fine dog. Oh, that would be a terrible monument." Freddy's eyes turned, startled.

"It's up to us," said Mike gratefully, "to go after the real facts, with real detective work. For Bones's sake."

"It's the least we can do for him," said Miss Dana calmly and decisively.

Freddy's face lifted.

"Trouble is," Russell went on quickly, "people get things wrong. Sometimes they don't remember straight. They make mistakes."

"Ole Matlin tells lies," said Freddy.

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"If he does," said Russell cheerfully, "then we've got to *prove* that he does. Now, I've figured out a plan, if Miss Dana will help us. You pick a couple of the fellows, Fred. You have to go to all the houses around here and ask some questions. Better pick the smartest ones. To find out the truth is very hard."

"And then?" said Miss Dana in a fluttery voice.

"Then they, and you, if you will—"

"Me?" She straightened. "I'm a schoolteacher, Mr. Russell. Won't the police—"

"Not before dark."

"What are *you* going to be doing?"

"Dirtier work."

She bit her lip. "It's nosey. It's—well, it's not done."

"No," he agreed. "You may lose your job."

She wasn't a bad-looking young woman. Her eyes were fine. Her brow was serious, but there was the ghost of a dimple in her cheek. Her hands moved. "Oh, well, I can always take up beauty culture or something. What are the questions?" She had a pad of paper and a pencil half out of her purse, and looked alert and efficient.

Now, as the gang huddled, there was a warm sense of conspiracy growing. "Going to be the dickens of a job," Russell warned them. And he outlined some questions. "Now, don't let anybody fool you into taking a sloppy answer," he concluded. "Ask how they know. Get real evidence. But don't go to Matlin's—I'll go there."

"I'm not afraid of him." Freddy's nostrils flared.

"I think I stand a better chance of getting the answers," said Russell coolly. "Aren't we after the answers?"

Freddy swallowed. "And if it turns out that—?"

"It turns out the way it turns out," said Russell, rumpling the towhead. "Choose your henchmen. Tough, remember."

"Phil. Ernie." The kids who were left out wailed as the three small boys and their teacher, who wasn't a lot bigger, rose from the ground.

"It'll be tough, Mr. Russell," Miss Dana said grimly. "Whoever you are, thank you for getting me into this."

"I'm just a stranger," he said gently, looking down at her face. "But you're a friend and a teacher." Pain crossed her eyes. "You'll be teaching now, you know."

Her chin went up. "Okay, kids. I'll keep the paper and pencil. Freddy, wipe your face. Stick your shirt in, Phil. Now, let's organize."

It was nearly nine o'clock when the boys and the teacher, looking

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rather exhausted, came back to the judge's house. Russell, whose face was grave, reached for the papers in her hands.

"Just a minute," said Miss Dana. "Judge, we have some questions."

Ernie Allen bared his teeth and stepped forward. "Did you see Bones today?" he asked with the firm skill of repetition. The judge nodded. "How many times and when?"

"One. Er—shortly before noon. He crossed my yard, going east."

The boys bent over the pad. Then Freddy's lips opened hard. "How do you know the time, Judge Kittinger?"

"Well," said the judge, "hm—let me think. I was looking out the window for my company and just then he arrived."

"Five minutes of one, sir," Mike said.

Freddy flashed around. "What makes you sure?"

"I looked at my watch," said Russell. "I was taught to be exactly five minutes early when I'm asked to a meal." There was a nodding among the boys, and Miss Dana wrote on the pad.

"Then I was mistaken," said the judge thoughtfully. "It was shortly before one. Of course."

Phil Bourchard took over. "Did you see anyone go into Matlin's driveway or back lot?"

"I did not."

"Were you out of doors or did you look up that way?"

"Yes, I— When we left the table. Mike?"

"At two-thirty, sir."

"How do you know that time for sure?" asked Freddy Titus.

"Because I wondered if I could politely stay a little longer." Russell's eyes congratulated Lillian Dana. She had made them a team, and on it Freddy was the How-do-you-know-for-sure Department.

"Can you swear," continued Phil to the judge, "there was nobody at all around Matlin's back lot then?"

"As far as my view goes," answered the judge cautiously.

Freddy said promptly, "He couldn't see much. Too many trees. We can't count that."

They looked at Miss Dana and she marked it down on the pad.

"Thank you. Now, you have a cook, sir? We must question her."

"This way," said the judge, rising and bowing.

Russell looked after them and his eyes were velvet again. He met the judge's twinkle. Then he sat down and ran an eye quickly over some of the sheets of paper, passing each on to his host.

Startled, he looked up. Lillian Dana, standing in the doorway, was watching his face.

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"Do you think, Mike—?"

A paper dropped in the judge's hand.

"We can't stop," she challenged.

Russell nodded and turned to the judge. "We may need some high brass, sir." The judge rose. "And tell me, sir, where Matlin plays golf. And the telephone number of the Salvage League. No, Miss Dana, we can't stop. We'll take it where it turns."

"We must," she said.

It was nearly ten when the neighbors began to come in. The judge greeted them soberly. The chief of police arrived. Mrs. Somers, looking grim and uprooted in a crepe dress, came. Mr. Matlin, Mrs. Page, Mr. and Mrs. Daugherty, a Mr. and Mrs. Baker, and Diane Bourchard who was sixteen. They looked curiously at the tight little group, the boys and their blonde teacher.

Last of all to arrive was Mr. Russell, who slipped in from the dark veranda, accepted the judge's nod, and called the meeting to order.

"We've been investigating the strange death of a dog," he began. "Chief Anderson, while we know your department would have done so in good time, we also know you're busy, and some of us—" he glanced at the dark windowpane "—couldn't wait. Will you help us now?"

The chief said genially, "That's why I'm here, I guess." It was the judge and his stature that gave this meeting standing. Naive, young, a little absurd it might have seemed had not the old man sat so quietly attentive among them.

"Thank you, sir. Now, all we want to know is what happened to the dog." Russell looked about him. "First, let's demolish the tramp theory." Mrs. Page's feathers ruffled. Russell smiled at her. "Mrs. Page saw a man go down Matlin's drive this morning. The Salvage League sent a truck to pick up rags and papers, which at ten forty-two was parked in front of the Daughertys'. The man, who seemed poorly dressed in his working clothes, went to the tool room behind Matlin's garage, as he had been instructed to. He picked up a bundle and returned to his truck. Mrs. Page, the man was there. It was only your opinion about him that proves to have been, not a lie, but an error."

He turned his head. "Now, we have tried to trace the dog's day and we have done remarkably well, too." As he traced it for them, some faces began to wear at least the ghost of a smile, seeing the little dog frisking through the neighborhood. "Just before one," Mike

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went on, "Bones ran across the judge's yard to the Allens', where the kids were playing ball. Up to this time no one saw Bones *above* Greenwood Lane or *up* Hannibal Street. But Miss Diane Bourchard, recovering from a sore throat, stayed at home today. After lunch she sat on her porch directly across from Mr. Matlin's back lot. She was waiting for a few minutes since she expected some friends to come by.

"She saw, not Bones, but Corky, an animal belonging to Mr. Daugherty, playing in Matlin's lot at about two o'clock. I want your opinion. If poisoned bait had been lying there at two, would Corky have found it?"

"Seems so," said Daugherty. "Thank God Corky didn't." He bit his tongue. "Corky's a show dog," he blundered.

"But Bones," said Russell gently, "was more like a friend. That's why we care, of course."

"It's a damned shame!" Daugherty looked around angrily.

"It is," said Mrs. Baker. "He was a friend of mine, Bones was."

"Go on," growled Daugherty. "What else did you dig up?"

"Mr. Matlin left for his golf at eleven-thirty. Now, you see, it looks as if Matlin couldn't have left poison behind him."

"I most certainly did not," snapped Matlin. "I have said so. I will not stand for this sort of innuendo. I am not a liar. You said it was a conference."

Mike held the man's eye. "We're simply trying to find out what happened to the dog," he said. Matlin fell silent.

"Surely you realize," Mike went on, "that, human frailty being what it is, there may have been other errors in what we were told this afternoon. There was at least one more.

"Mr. and Mrs. Baker worked in their garden this afternoon. Bones abandoned the ball game to visit the Bakers' dog, Smitty. At three o'clock, the Bakers, after discussing the time carefully in case it was too late in the day, decided to bathe Smitty. When they caught him, for his ordeal, Bones was still there. So, you see, Miss May Matlin, who says she saw Bones lying by the sidewalk *before three o'clock*, was mistaken."

Matlin twitched. Russell said sharply, "The testimony of the Bakers is extremely clear." The Bakers, who looked alike, both brown, outdoor people, nodded vigorously.

"The time at which Mr. Matlin returned is quite well established. Diane saw him. Mrs. Daugherty, next door, decided to take a nap at five after three. She had a roast to put in at four-thirty. Therefore,

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she's sure of the time. She went upstairs and from an upper window, she, too, saw Mr. Matlin come home. Both witnesses say he drove his car into the garage at three-ten, got out, and went around the building to the right of it—*on the weedy side.*"

Mr. Matlin was sweating. His forehead was beaded. He did not speak.

Mike shifted papers. "Now, we know that the kids trooped up to Phil Bourchard's kitchen at about a quarter of three. Whereas Bones, realizing that Smitty was in for it, and shying away from soap and water like any sane dog, went up Hannibal Street at three o'clock sharp. He may have known in some doggy way where Freddy was. Can we see Bones loping up Hannibal Street? Going *above* Greenwood Lane?"

"We can," said Daugherty. He was watching Matlin. "Besides, he was found above Greenwood Lane soon after."

"No one," said Mike slowly, "was seen in Matlin's back lot except Matlin. Yet almost immediately after Matlin was there, the little dog died."

"Didn't Diane?"

"Diane's friends came at three-twelve. Their evidence is not reliable." Diane blushed.

"This—this is intolerable!" croaked Matlin. "Why *my* back lot?"

Daugherty said, "There was no poison lying around my place, I'll tell you that."

"How do you know?" begged Matlin. And Freddy's eyes, with the smudges under them, followed to Russell's face. "Why not in the street? Or from some passing car?"

Mike said, "I'm afraid it's not likely. You see, Mr. Otis Carnavon was stalled at the corner of Hannibal and Lee. Trying to flag a push. Anything thrown from a car on that block he would have seen."

"Was the poison quick?" demanded Daugherty.

"It was quick. The dog couldn't go far after he got it. He got cyanide."

Matlin's shaking hand removed his glasses. They were wet.

"Some of you may be amateur photographers," Mike said. "Mr. Matlin, is there cyanide in your cellar darkroom?"

"Yes, but I keep it—most meticulously." Matlin began to cough.

When the noise of his spasm died, Mike said, "The poison was embedded in ground meat which analyzed, roughly, half beef and the rest pork and veal, half and half." Matlin encircled his throat with his fingers. "I've checked with four neighborhood butchers and

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the dickens of a time I had," said Mike. No one smiled. Only Freddy looked up at him with solemn sympathy. "Ground meat was delivered to at least five houses in the vicinity. Meat that *was* one-half beef, one-quarter pork, one-quarter veal was delivered at ten this morning to Matlin's house."

A stir like an angry wind blew over the room. The chief of police made some shift of his weight so that his chair creaked.

"It begins to look—" growled Daugherty.

"Now," said Russell sharply, "we must be very careful. One more thing. The meat had been seasoned."

"Seasoned!"

"With salt. And with thyme."

"Thyme," groaned Matlin.

Freddy looked up at Miss Dana with bewildered eyes. She put her arm around him.

"As far as motives are concerned," said Mike quietly, "I can't discuss them. It's inconceivable to me that any man would poison a dog." Nobody spoke. "However, where are we?" Mike's voice seemed to catch Matlin just in time to keep him from falling off the chair. "We don't know yet what happened to the dog." His voice rang. "Mr. Matlin, will you help us to the answer?"

Matlin said thickly, "Better get those kids out of here."

Miss Dana moved, but Russell said, "No. They've worked hard for the truth. They've earned it. And if it's to be had, they shall have it."

"You know?" whimpered Matlin.

Mike said, "I called your golf club. I've looked into your trash incinerator. Yes, I know. But I want you to tell us."

Daugherty said, "Well? Well?" And Matlin covered his face.

Mike said gently, "I think there was an error. Mr. Matlin, I'm afraid, did poison the dog. But he never meant to, and he didn't know he had done it."

Matlin said, "I'm sorry. It's—I can't. She means to do her best. But she's a terrible cook. Somebody gave her those—those herbs. Thyme—thyme in everything. She fixed me a lunchbox. I—couldn't stomach it. I bought my lunch at the club."

Mike nodded.

Matlin went on, his voice cracking. "I never— You see, I didn't even know it was meat the dog got. She said—she told me the dog was already dead."

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"And of course," said Mike, "in your righteous wrath you never paused to say to yourself, Wait, what *did* happen to the dog?"

"Mr. Russell, I didn't lie. How could I know there was thyme in it? When I got home I had to get rid of the hamburger she'd fixed for me—I didn't want to hurt her feelings. She tries—tries so hard." He sat up suddenly. *"But what she tried to do today,"* he said, with his eyes almost out of his head, *"was to poison me!"* His bulging eyes roved. They came to Freddy. He gasped. He said, "Your dog saved my life!"

"Yes," said Mike quickly, "Freddy's dog saved your life. You see, your stepdaughter would have kept trying."

People drew in their breaths. "The buns are in your incinerator," Mike said. "She guessed what happened to the dog, went for the buns, and hid them. She was late, you remember, getting to the disturbance. And she did lie."

Chief Anderson rose.

"Her mother—" said Matlin frantically. "Her mother—"

Mike Russell put his hand on the plump shoulder. "Her mother's been in torment, tortured by the rivalry between you. Don't you think her mother senses something wrong?"

Miss Dana wrapped Freddy in her arms. "Oh, what a wonderful dog Bones was!" She covered the sound of the other voices. "Even when he died, he saved a man's life. Oh, Freddy, he was a wonderful dog." And Freddy, not quite taking everything in yet, was released to simple sorrow and wept quietly against his friend.

When they went to fetch May Matlin, she was not in the house. They found her in the Titus back shed. She seemed to be looking for something.

Next day, when Mr. and Mrs. Titus came home, they found that although his little dog had died their Freddy was all right. The judge, Russell, and Miss Dana told them all about it.

Mrs. Titus wept. Mr. Titus swore. He wrung Russell's hand. "For stealing the gun," he babbled.

But the mother cried, "And for showing him, for teaching him. Oh, Miss Dana—oh, my dear!"

The judge waved from his veranda as the dark head and the blonde drove away.

"I think Miss Dana likes him," said Ernie Allen.

"How do you know for sure?" asked Freddy Titus.

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9 stories—6 *NEW*

JOHN MORTIMER (about Rumpole)

RUTH RENDELL (about a houseful of cats)

ROBERT BARNARD (about the habit of widowhood)

P. D. JAMES (about a very desirable residence)

PETER LOVESEY (about being of sound mind)

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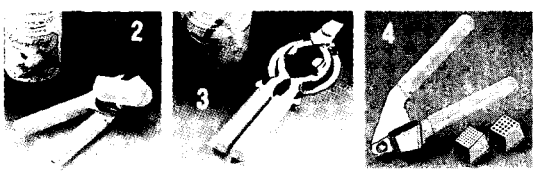
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ PERFECT KITCHEN ROLL DISPENSER AND 3 PIECE KITCHEN TOOL KIT

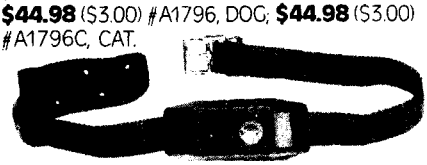
Do kitchen wraps have you all thumbs? Then THE Perfect Kitchen Dispenser is for you. It's the only one that, cut after cut, holds the roll end ready to be picked up and pulled out for the next sheet. The two "neat sheet" cutters feature stainless steel blades for cutting that's a cinch. Holds standard rolls of cling-film, aluminum foil, or wax paper plus a paper towel holder. Simple front loading procedure makes replacement a snap. Sleek white and grey design fits any decor. But there's more: it comes with state of the art hand can opener, super strong jar and bottle opener, and impressive garlic/onion press with 2 inserts for fine and coarse pressing. So get a handle on kitchen wraps and treat yourself. **$69.98** ($8.50) #A1954.

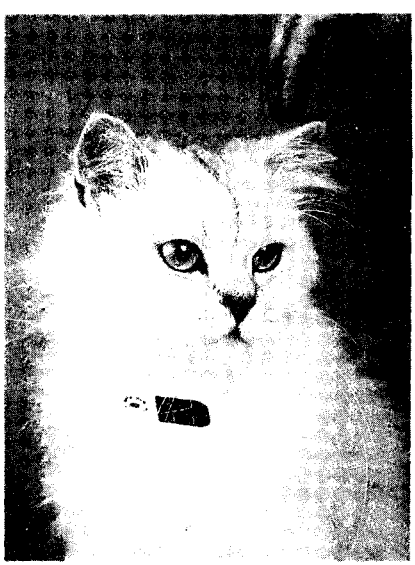


1. DISPENSER
2. HAND CAN OPENER
3. JAR AND BOTTLE OPENER
4. GARLIC/ONION PRESS

▼ DO FLEAS HAVE EARS?

The Microtech Flea Collar with its blasts of ultrasound creates such an intolerable environment that fleas and ticks abandon their pet hosts within 5 days. It is designed specifically for fleas and focuses on a 4' zone of protection, the Microtech Collar outperforms other kinds of ultrasonic pest chasers. A vast improvement over poison powders and chemical collars. Works on cats *or* dogs. Adjustable 19" collar fits 97% of dogs and runs for 6-8 months on 2 lithium cells (included). You can afford to see if it *really* works because you are fully protected by our guarantee — you have nothing to lose but the fleas! **$44.98** ($3.00) #A1796, DOG; **$44.98** ($3.00) #A1796C, CAT.





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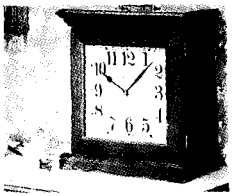
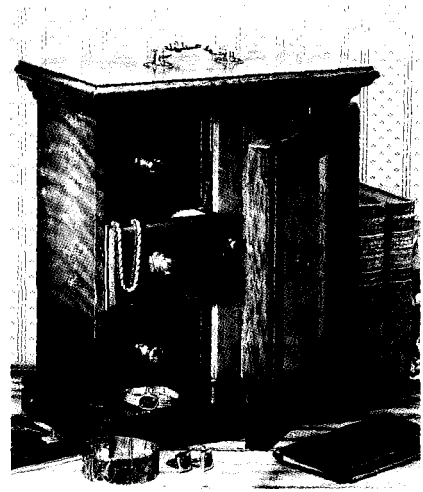
▼ A TIMELY SECRET



Do you have valuables or other important items that need a secure and secret hiding place? Why not store them in an elegant 17th century reproduction of a mantelpiece clock! Handcrafted in cherry, and accented with solid brass, the clock has large antique style numbers and features a quartz powered movement. This lovely accent piece measures 13" (h) x 11¾" (w) x 6½" (d) and will grace any dresser, desk or mantel. The clock face opens to reveal 3 fabric lined drawers and a larger (10" x 4" x 3¾"), compartment, complete with key. Beauty and security in one lovely piece—what a timely idea! **$99.98** ($8.00) #A1917.



▼ TEACH AN OLD LAMP NEW TRICKS

Any lamp that takes a standard bulb can be updated with the Touchtronic dimmer. No rewiring needed-just screw into lamp socket. Then your touch on any metal part becomes the "switch"-touch once for low light, again for medium, a third time for full wattage. Handy when you're entering a dark room, great at bedside and a real comfort to the arthritic or the ill. You'll save time, money and electricity-no more 3-way bulbs to buy and you pay for only as much light as you need. U.L. listed; one-year factory warranty. **$15.98** ($4.00) #A1700. 2 for **$27.98** ($6.00) #A17002.

▼ FRESHENED FOOTWEAR

Just put a Stinky Pinky "sock" in each shoe and overnight odor is gone, absorbed by the special blend of all natural earth materials. Works in running shoes, sneakers, boots, leather shoes, anything that goes on your feet. And keeps on working, too—just put Stinky Pinkys out in the sun for a day every three months or so to restore their odor-catching ability. Three pairs of Stinky Pinkys, enough for 6 shoes or boots, costs **$19.98** ($4.00) #13263.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 061 EL; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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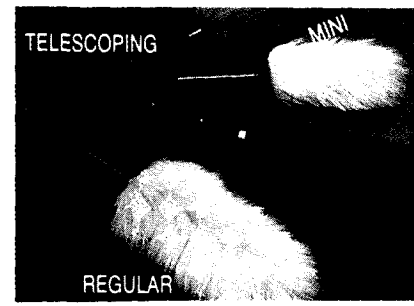
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ EVERYTHING BAG

People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **$24.98** ($4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki, #A1957-Gray.

▼ LAMBSWOOL DUSTERS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters. **$22.98** ($4.00) #A1870.

▼ TALKING ALARM CLOCK

Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½"x 3"x4". **$27.98** ($4.50) #A1916.

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